

Baby steps by Thei

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: (the baby is not harmed though), Billy Hargrove Tries to Be a Better Person, Co-Parenting, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Kid Fic, M/M, Mentions of Suicide, Mentions of Teen Pregnancy, Neil Hargrove's A+ Parenting, Not Season/Series 03 Compliant, Prostitution, Slow Burn, billy deserves a bathtub, billy loves his child, courting through cookies, enemies to friends to co-parents to boyfriends, neil's an asshole, steve learns about laundromats, unprepared teenage parent billy

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Summary:

A baby.

He's holding a baby.

There's a baby in Billy's hand, and Billy – seventeen years old – is suddenly a father.

1. Prologue: Billy and Lisa

Author's Note:

Based on [this tumblr post](#) which, in turn, is based off a dream I had where Billy had a baby and lived in a caravan and worked at a bakery. So if you want the short version, you can just read that post instead.

This fic is completed, I'm just casually reading through chapters before posting them.

Also, fair warning: in the prologue, Billy's trying out the heterosexual sex thing with a female friend (only in this fandom do we warn for heterosexual relations, lol). Nothing graphic, and none of them are into it. But they kinda needed to do that, for the rest of the story to happen. Since, you know. Kid fic.

Once upon a time, Billy Hargrove had a girlfriend. Or, rather, a girl friend. Her name was Lisa. She lived two houses down the street, and while they didn't exactly hang out in the same circles, they used to walk each other to and from school. This gave them a lot of time to talk, and ... Lisa was cool. She listened to the same kind of music as Billy did and, above all, she was *there*.

Maybe she even understood him in a way – and maybe he understood her, in turn. They both had strict parents. Lisa's parents were deeply religious and didn't seem to approve of anything she did, and Neil was ... well. Neil was Neil. Billy and Lisa often found themselves in each other's company, especially if one of them needed to get out from under their parents' watchful eyes for a bit.

Billy often thought that everything would be so much easier if he liked Lisa as more than a friend. Then maybe Neil would stop calling him those ugly names – which Billy secretly thought were true – whenever he slapped him around.

And perhaps Lisa thought the same thing, because one time in late spring, when Billy showed up sporting a split lip and a bad attitude,

she sat down on the steps in front of her house and patted the space beside her until he sat down.

“What happened this time?” she asked.

He told her, like he always did. She was the only one who knew for certain about his situation at home – and he was pretty sure he was the only one who knew about how her parents treated her, too. This time, when his voice broke while telling her how Neil had shoved his face into a bookcase after calling him a ‘faggot’, Lisa bit her lip.

And then she asked if Billy wanted to be her boyfriend.

Billy balked at that, because he liked her, sure, but he didn’t *like-like* her. But she just rolled her eyes at him and said that maybe it would get Neil to back off. And maybe, she added, it would get her own parents to ease up a bit, too; they knew Neil Hargrove as a strict and hard-working man, and apparently liked him as much as they could like anyone who wasn’t a member of their Church.

Billy thought it over, remembered Neil’s eyes flash when he found Billy in front of the TV, watching a movie that just happened to have a shirtless man on at that moment. He remembered how his father spit out ‘faggot!’ just before splitting his lip on a wooden shelf. And he thought maybe, maybe Lisa was right. So he agreed.

They started dating. Which really just meant that they hung out like they normally did, but referred to each other as “boyfriend” and “girlfriend” in front of their parents. And it actually worked, in that it helped get Neil off Billy’s back. Lisa’s parents were more hesitant. One night they invited Billy and Neil over for dinner and heavily implied that Lisa was saving herself for marriage – embarrassing for both Billy and Lisa, who refused to look at each other – but if that was something that Billy could respect, then they would give their blessing. Neil assured them that his boy knew all about respect, and that was that.

So Billy and Lisa dated. It was a relationship that worked out for the both of them, even if it wasn’t really a relationship at all, because it gave them both a little more freedom. Sure, they had to hold hands sometimes, if their parents were around, and a couple of times Billy

had pressed a kiss to Lisa's lips if he knew that Neil would be able to see them, but they never did anything when they were alone. They just hung out.

It was depressing really, how much easier things got for Billy when Neil thought he had a girlfriend. And Billy *wished* it could be real, because of how easy things would continue to be. Thought that maybe he could learn to love Lisa like a guy was *supposed* to love his girlfriend. Thought that maybe, he could learn to want her in the right ways.

It was Lisa who suggested that they should have sex. It was one day in early June when her parents had kept her cooped up in the house for a couple of days and hadn't allowed her to go out. Billy wasn't entirely sure what happened in her house when she wasn't allowed out, but he knew that she was always more quiet, after. This time she was antsy, nervous – looked like she was ready to vibrate out of her skin.

"Your parents won't like it if they find out," Billy said, to stall. Lisa had only nodded, and Billy *got it* then. If there was one thing he could understand, it was the desire to do the absolute opposite of what your parents told you to do. And he *liked* Lisa, and it would be so much easier if he learned to love her – learned to *want* her – and even though he was dreading it, maybe this was where he had to start? Besides, she had helped him many times before. They could do this, the two of them. They could make it work.

They didn't make it work. It was *weird*, and it was awkward, and Billy didn't know where to put his hands and they forgot that they were supposed to be kissing and Lisa grimaced when it hurt and Billy felt like shit the entire time. Afterwards, they got dressed and didn't say a word to each other, and then Lisa burst into tears. Billy, afraid that she was still hurting, awkwardly patted her on the back and apologized, at which point she let out a somewhat hysterical giggle and said, "I don't even *like* boys, but I thought ... I thought that maybe I could, with you."

Billy, stunned into silence, just stared at her as she kept on crying – because perhaps they had more in common than their taste in music and the fact that they both had shit parents. Eventually, he cleared

his throat and said, in a low voice, "I do."

"What?" she sniffled and looked up.

"I like ... boys. I think."

It felt strange to say it out loud, but it was also a relief. Because this was *Lisa*. She wouldn't tell on him.

Lisa stared at him with big eyes. And then she started laughing. It was infectious; Billy laughed too. He laughed until he cried (and thought that Lisa probably did as well) and then they finally got themselves together and just sat there, next to each other, on the edge of Billy's bed. Lisa leaned her head on his shoulder and sighed, deeply, before saying, "Let's never do that again. The sex thing."

"Okay," said Billy, relieved.

They kept up the farce for a while, but there was something awkward between them now. Knowing what they did about each other made it easier, but they were both miserable. Billy was wondering if this was going to be the rest of his life; if he'd have to pretend like this for the rest of his days. By the look on Lisa's face whenever she kissed Billy on the cheek, she was feeling the same.

They were better off as friends, but trying to be something they weren't was making it hard to go back to what they'd been. They started drifting apart. There could be several days, now, between the two of them seeking each other out, and when they did, they didn't stay together for long.

Neil asked him about it, one day in the middle of July. Asked him why he never brought his girlfriend over nowadays. Billy shrugged, and mumbled that they just hadn't seen much of each other lately. To his surprise, Neil seemed pleased with his answer. Patted him on the back and said, "Lisa's a nice girl, but you're a young man – there are lots of nice girls out there. No one expects you to tie yourself down to one girl for the rest of your life at your age."

It was the closest thing to approval that Billy had gotten from his father for as far back as he could remember. And the words stuck

with him. So he started hanging out with other girls. At the mall, at parties, at the beach. He saw less and less of Lisa, but didn't have time to miss her.

Until August, when she appeared on his doorstep one morning when Neil had taken Susan and Max into town and left Billy home alone in the house. It was a Sunday, and Billy was on his way out, to hang out with some of his friends. He almost walked right into her when he opened the door. She looked awful – pale, and like she hadn't slept for a week. She was hugging herself, and wearing a long-sleeved shirt even though it was a warm day.

"I need to talk to you," she said.

There was something urgent in her tone of voice that made his excuses die on his tongue. So he invited her in, and they went to Billy's room and sat down on the edge of Billy's bed – like the last time, after their disastrous attempt at acting normal – and that's when she told Billy that she was pregnant.

Billy's mind blanked. "Are you *sure*?" he asked, somewhat desperately, and she nodded and started crying softly. Billy put an arm around her shoulders and swallowed against the lump in his throat, blinking away his own tears.

They didn't decide on what to do that day. Lisa had to leave, to go with her parents to Church, and Billy – well, Billy went out with his friends and got drunk. Staggered home in the middle of the night, got chewed out for it by Neil and slapped around some, and then crashed into bed.

He didn't hear from Lisa for more than a week, and he was too afraid to seek her out. But she must have told her parents eventually, because one day in the middle of August when Susan and Max were out, Neil stormed into his room and proceeded to beat the ever-loving shit out of him. Because, as it turned out, while Neil Hargrove hadn't exactly been too pleased about the possibility of his son being into boys, he wasn't thrilled about him getting a girl pregnant, either.

Apparently, Lisa's father had called Neil and told him in no uncertain terms what he thought of Neil's ability to teach his son respect and

responsibility, and Neil had taken it personally.

Billy could barely get out of bed for two days following the beating, and he was grounded indefinitely once he managed to get on his feet; only let out to go to school, and drive Max around.

He wasn't allowed to talk to Lisa, and the one time he dared to sneak in a phone call – he'd stopped at a pay phone when he'd picked Max up from a friend's house – her father was the one who answered, and when he heard that it was Billy on the other end, he snarled on the phone and told him that he was going to hell. So that went well.

Moreover, Max let slip that he'd made a phone call, and Billy got punished for it.

Neil secretly arranged for the move to Hawkins, Indiana, and didn't tell Billy about it until the day before they left. Billy raged and protested, but Neil pushed him up against a wall, a hand to his throat, and growled, "*You* made this happen, son. *You're* the reason we have to leave." And seventeen years living under his father's roof had taught Billy when to shut his mouth.

He wasn't allowed to see Lisa before they left, not even to say goodbye.

Billy got to Hawkins, and he hated it immediately. He hated the people, he hated the town, he hated how he was brought here against his will and without being given a choice. He hated how the world didn't seem to have space for people like him, and how everything seemed even smaller here – even more stifling.

But he was a survivor, so he survived. He dialed up the charm and climbed to the top of the social ladder in no time. He did well in school, even though he started the school year later than the rest of them. He attended some parties and talked to the right people and quickly got a reputation. Neil had seemed to approve of him pursuing girls, so that's what he did. He made a point out of having a new girl on his arm every week, and while he made sure to be seen around town with them, he never took any of them home.

He carted Max around, got into fights, and tried to keep his head down at home – counting down the days until he'd be able to leave, move out and go back home.

In the house, Neil kept him on his toes. Never wasted an opportunity to tell Billy that it was his fault that they had to move – but he never mentioned the reason out loud. None of them did. It was like Lisa's name was forbidden, and like the whole thing had been erased from their memory. It just wasn't mentioned out loud in the Hargrove-Mayfield household. Billy thought of Lisa a lot, wondered how she was doing. Wondered how her very religious parents dealt with their daughter having to get an abortion without the neighbors finding out. Wondered if Lisa got in as much trouble as he did, in the end.

He tried calling, once, when he figured that she would have just gotten home from school. But it was Lisa's father who answered this time as well, and Billy hung up the phone before saying anything. It was the last time he tried to call, because he didn't want it to get back to Neil that he'd tried to contact her.

In the end, Billy tried to put her out of his mind. He had enough on his plate in Hawkins, just getting through the days.

2. Billy and Neil

Despite everything, Billy does okay in Hawkins. He has people to hang out with in and outside of school, people to party with, admirers who stay in his orbit and provide him with what he needs. He keeps up his womanizing ways, and finds that it's much easier to do so when he doesn't actually care about the girls he go out with. If his eyes sometimes drift to boys, he forces himself to look away. If he's unsuccessful, he starts a fight.

He starts a lot of fights. He wins most of them.

He's not close to anyone, but he doesn't really want to be. First chance he gets after graduating, he's leaving, and he's not planning on looking back.

Neil is still Neil, and will still give Billy a slap for not doing the dishes right away, or slam him face-first into a wall for not looking him in the eye. But those are small things. There hasn't been a major incident since January – which is why it takes Billy by complete surprise when, a night at the beginning of May, Neil wakes him by ripping him out of bed – late at night, long after everyone else has gone to bed.

“Wha-?” Billy says, confused, but the rest dies on his tongue when he looks up and meets his father's eyes. Neil is furious, and Billy swallows. It's gonna be a bad one.

“Get up,” Neil says, and when Billy stumbles to his feet he's grabbed painfully by his upper arms and dragged through the house and out through the back door. A part of him wants to make a ruckus just to wake someone up, but the bigger part of him knows that it wouldn't help. No one in this house would help him, and it would only make Neil angrier.

Once in the backyard, Billy turns to face him, and is met with a fist to the face that sends him to the ground. Neil then proceeds to beat the absolute shit out of him, and the worst part is that Billy doesn't know why. He can take a beating, but if he knows why it's happening, he can apologize for it and make it end faster. And usually, Neil makes

damn sure that Billy knows exactly what he's done wrong while he's being punished for it, so that he won't do it again. But this time, Neil is eerily silent – only letting out the occasional grunt of exertion. He doesn't give a hint as to why this is happening, and Billy – biting back his cries and trying to make himself as small as possible – can't think of anything he's done lately; certainly not anything that would warrant *this*. There's nothing to apologize for, so Billy keeps his mouth shut and waits for it to end.

It's not until the lights turn on in Neil and Susan's bedroom – probably Susan, waking up – that Neil stops his assault and takes a step back. He straightens up and looks down on Billy, curled up and groaning on the grass, and his voice is almost pained when he says, "You messed up now, son." And then, with a sigh, "I swear, boy, I got you for my sins."

And then he turns his back and leaves Billy there, presumably to go back inside and assure his wife that everything is fine.

Everything is *not* fine. Billy is bruised and bloody and everything hurts when he finally manages to stumble to his feet. Something stings like hell in his side, making his breath catch, and he hopes nothing is broken.

He hobbles inside, manages to keep quiet enough that Neil doesn't come out of his bedroom for round two for waking up the family, and crashes into his bed.

The next few days are ... not fun. He stays home from school – Neil even calls it in. Neither of them wants Billy to go to school with such obvious marks on his face. Better wait until the swelling goes down, at least. Billy mostly keeps in his room during these days, unless it's dinnertime. Even then, he eats fast, says his thanks to Susan, and goes back into his room as soon as he is excused in an effort to avoid Neil as much as possible. It's been several days since the beating, and Neil hasn't said a single word to him. But he watches him. Every time Billy ventures out, he can feel his father's eyes on him whenever he's in his line of sight.

It's unnerving. He still doesn't know what he did, and Neil doesn't tell him; just quietly seethes in anger whenever Billy is near. It makes the hairs on the back of Billy's neck stand up, because usually a beating takes the edge of Neil's anger. This time, though, it feels like something else is coming. Something worse.

So he stays in his room. He reads, he does some homework that a classmate brought home for him, he listens to music – at a reasonable volume, even. He does everything he can to avoid setting Neil off again.

During dinner the following Sunday, when Susan and Neil are doing most of the talking as usual, and Max and Billy try to carve up their portions of too dry Sunday steak, someone rings the doorbell. All conversation stops. Billy makes no move to get up and answer the door, because Sunday dinner is Family Time in the Hargrove-Mayfield household, and is not to be interrupted by anything short of a fire. Which is why it's so surprising to see Neil dab at his mouth with his napkin before putting it down, and getting up from the table.

Billy isn't the only one who's surprised. Susan and Max are also watching, eyebrows raised and – in Max's case, at least – mouth open, as Neil walks out of the kitchen *in the middle of dinner*. This is unprecedented.

They can hear voices from the hallway, one is Neil and the other is ... Billy doesn't recognize the voice, but it's a man, at least. He's curious, but he still flinches when Neil calls from the hallway, "Billy! Come here."

It's the first thing he's said to Billy since the beating.

Hesitantly, Billy gets up. He doesn't look at Susan or Max, who wisely stay seated at the table, but he hears Max pick up her fork and continue eating, and wishes he could do the same.

When he gets to the hall, at first he doesn't see who's at the door. When Neil shifts the door to the side, Billy gets a better look. The man is big and burly, hair graying at the temples, and looks slightly familiar, although Billy doesn't recognize him at once. It takes a couple of seconds for the penny to drop, and when it does, Billy

blinks in surprise because it *makes no sense*.

Why would Lisa's father, from California, be at their door on a Sunday evening in Hawkins, Indiana?

Both men turn to watch Billy when he comes into view, but Billy doesn't have time to worry about their cold gazes on him, or the grim lines of their mouths. Because the man, *Lisa's father*, is holding a duffel bag in one hand – and a baby carrier in the other.

There's a blanket in the baby carrier. The blanket is moving.

Billy stops breathing.

There are words. The man is speaking, *Neil* is speaking, and Billy knows he should be paying attention because it won't do to not pay attention when Neil is speaking but –

– *there's something moving in the baby carrier* –

He rips his eyes away. Stares at the man at the door, eyes too wide, heart doing its best to beat out of his chest. He catches snippets of what the men are saying.

Lisa's baby ... depressed, after what Billy did to her ... too much ... wasn't ready to be a parent ...

Lisa's dead.

Everything snaps back into focus. There's a frighteningly sharp edge to reality.

"My wife is ill, Mr. Hargrove," Lisa's father says. He's looking at Neil. "We have just lost our only daughter. And anyway, as we discussed over the phone –"

Billy's breath catches in his throat. Neil knew. That's what the beating was about. That's why Billy's still sporting bruises and moving gingerly. Neil *knew*, and didn't tell him.

He turns to stare incredulously at his father, feeling oddly betrayed, as the other man continues.

“– a child should be with their parent.”

At that, he hands the baby carrier over to Neil, who holds it for less than two seconds – “Yes well, maybe this will make my son shape up and show some responsibility” – before he all but shoves it into Billy’s hands. Billy only barely keeps from dropping it, but gets his fingers to work in the last second. But he jostles it, and the blanket makes a sound.

Billy’s heart skips a beat. He doesn’t dare breathe.

He’s been lifting weights for years, but this is the heaviest thing he’s ever held. The plastic handle of the baby carrier is pulling him down, down, *down*, and if he was alone he’d be on his knees already.

But he’s not alone. There are two men here, who hate him. Lisa’s father, who probably made her keep the baby as a punishment ... And Billy’s own father, who is doing the same to Billy now.

Distantly, he hears them talking. Exchanging pleasantries or death threats, Billy couldn’t tell. He’s not listening to them. There is a tiny naked foot sticking out of the blanket. He knows that if he looked up, just a little, he would see a tiny head.

He doesn’t look up.

When the door closes, he swallows and raises his gaze. Neil is standing in the hall, holding the duffel bag, and watching Billy as if Billy is dog shit at the bottom of his shoe. There is anger on his face, and disgust, and something stony that Billy hasn’t seen before.

He’s not in a rush to find out what it’ll mean for him.

When Neil reaches out, Billy flinches. His father doesn’t care, but puts his hand on the back of Billy’s neck and steers him down the hallway. There’s a clink of cutlery against ceramics when they pass the kitchen, and both Susan and Max speak at the same time, but Neil shuts them down. Tells them that him and Billy has to have a talk, man to man. He steers Billy into Billy’s room, and closes the door behind them. Drops the duffel bag on the floor, and turns to face his son. To face Billy.

Billy, who's standing in the middle of his room, clutching the plastic handle of a baby carrier. A baby carrier which is holding a *baby*. *Billy's* baby.

"You've brought this upon yourself, you know," Neil says, and Billy swallows. Forces himself to pay attention, if only to distract himself from what he can feel moving in the baby carrier. "This is your own fault. Now you're going to have to take responsibility for your actions. You reap what you sow, boy."

Neil straightens up, uses the inch in height he's got on Billy to look down his nose at him. "You've always been a disappointment of a son, but I never thought you'd reach this level." He clenches his jaw. "But you've proved me wrong."

Usually, at this point of Neil's 'you're a disappointment' speech, Billy would expect to be punched or pushed, or at the very least, blinking tears out of his eyes after a stinging slap to the face. But Neil does none of this. What he does, is throw one last disdainful look down at what Billy's holding, before turning his back and walking out of the room without another word.

No punches this time. Billy faintly registers this, and blinks. Perhaps it's because he's holding a baby. Perhaps his father thinks that that is punishment enough.

Slowly, he looks down at the blanket. The foot is still there. He looks further up, holding his breath.

A tiny, scrunched up face is peeking out of the blanket, under a tiny white cap. The baby's eyes are closed, but it's moving its head from side to side. Not asleep.

A baby.

He's holding a baby.

There's a baby in Billy's hand, and Billy – seventeen years old – is suddenly a father.

He doesn't know how long he's standing there, just staring. Eventually, the baby starts fussing, making little *sounds*, and Billy doesn't know what to do. He panics. Sets the baby carrier down on the floor and rushes out of his room. He freezes in the doorway to the kitchen, where the rest of the family is clearing up after dinner. Or, well, Neil is sitting at the table while Max is clearing away the plates, and Susan has started doing the dishes. They obviously know what has happened, because Max is gaping and Susan turns big, frightened eyes to him. And Billy can't deal with this, he can't, he *can't* –

There's a mewling sound from behind him, and it doesn't even register with Billy until Neil raises an eyebrow like he's saying '*well?*'

Billy blinks. The mewling stops for a second, and turns into a wail. Not a very loud one, but still. He turns terrified eyes at Susan, who gives a little nod and wipes her hands on the kitchen towel.

"Susan," Neil says in warning, but she goes anyway. Nudges Billy's elbow when she passes him, and Billy lets out a breath. Doesn't dare look at Neil as he follows Susan back into his room.

Susan bends down and picks the baby up from under the blanket, not seeming to care about the screaming. The screaming instantly lessens. She tuts at the baby and moves a little, side to side, and somehow manages to stroke a thumb across its cheeks while she's holding it.

"Susan," Neil says again, voice cold. He's followed them in here. "It's is Billy's responsibility."

She looks between Billy and her husband, and must see the danger that lurks beneath the surface, because she gives a small nod and walks over to Billy. She doesn't just thrust the baby into his arms, though, like Neil did with the baby carrier. Instead, she nods at the bed and tells him to sit down. Billy, who would normally scoff at being told what to do by Susan of all people, immediately sits. She hands the baby over slowly, shows him how to hold it and to support its head. Shows him how he can lean it against his shoulder. When she stands back up, Billy's holding the baby.

He can feel it under his hands and against his chest, through a thin layer of whatever kind of clothes it's wearing. He can feel it breathe.

Hears the tiny sounds coming from its mouth, feels it as it's moving its head on his shoulder. It smells a bit funky. His heart is thudding in his chest, and he doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know how to do this. He doesn't know *anything*. This is the first time he's even touching a baby.

He looks at Susan, tries to convey this without words. *Begs her*, with his eyes. Her face softens. "I'll show you," she says. When Neil opens his mouth to protest, she turns to him and says, with a hint of something other than softness in her voice, "I'll show him. So he can take care of his child."

Neil, surprisingly, and after a couple of seconds of silence, gives a single nod and then glares at Billy. "You're lucky Susan is willing to show you the ropes, boy. Taking time out of her day to help you take care of this mess you've created."

Susan frowns, and Billy panics for a second. He doesn't want her to change her mind. "Thank you, Susan," he rasps, unprompted, because he needs her help. Neil gives another nod, satisfied for the moment, and leaves.

Susan watches him go, and then bends down to pick up the duffel bag. She brings it over to the bed and opens it.

"Oh good," she says, after rifling through it. "There are some diapers here." She throws a glance at Billy, who is only staring at her. "The store is closed now," she explains. "We're ... You're going to have to go there to get some things tomorrow." She hesitates, then adds, "I'll write you a list."

And *shit*, Billy hadn't even thought of that. He has some money, he's been saving for a long time. To be able to get out, go back home once he graduates, but now he's going to have to use it, won't he? He can't imagine Neil chipping in to help. Neil has made it abundantly clear that the baby is Billy's responsibility. He's pretty sure that includes paying for the stuff it'll need.

"But first, I'll show you how to change a diaper." Billy's blood runs cold, and he must look as alarmed as he feels because she gives him a little smile. "I think it's about time, actually." Is that why it smells so

funky?

She turns and leaves, and Billy wants to plead with her to come back. Or did she mean for him to follow her? He's holding a baby, he doesn't dare move. Before he can decide whether to get up or not, she comes back, holding a towel and some tissues in her hands. She folds the towel once, and drapes it over his bed, next to where he's sitting. Then she gently takes the baby from him, and puts it on the towel. It moves its tiny legs and arms and scrunches up its face, but doesn't scream.

She shows him how to unbutton the baby's clothes, and then proceeds to show him how to change the baby's diaper. It is *disgusting* – Billy almost pukes at the smell and the sight of the mess – but Neil is watching from the doorway so he forces himself to keep his face neutral and pay attention, because he doesn't think Neil will allow Susan to show him more than once.

He imagines that his father is torn. Neil has always been pretty clear on his opinion that it's a woman's job to take care of children – Billy would bet his Camaro on that Neil Hargrove have never changed a diaper in his life – and he has always pushed Billy to do *manly* things, especially after he started to suspect that Billy might have other preferences than girls. But he's also determined to see to it that Billy is properly punished this time. Which apparently entails doing 'women's work'.

Either way, Billy knows that if Neil had gotten his way, Susan wouldn't even be allowed to show him this much. So he grits his teeth, breathes through his mouth, and tries to learn.

When it's done, Susan buttons the clothes again and rubs her hand on the baby's belly. She smiles down at it, and that's when Neil barks from the doorway, "Susan!" She draws her hand back as if she's been burned, and stands up guiltily. Billy gets it. In this house, what Neil says goes.

"Look through the bag, see if you find any formula or bottles. If not, you'll have to buy some first thing tomorrow. You can always come to me if you have questions." She says the words, and probably means them, but Neil's glare tells Billy that he better not bother

Susan unless it's a real emergency. He's on his own.

Susan turns to leave. Neil holds out his arm for her – a gesture that looks chivalrous but everyone knows is just another order. Before Susan leaves, she stops and turns again, so she's facing Billy. She musters up a smile for him, and says, "It's a beautiful boy you've got there, Billy."

And. It's like a punch to the gut, because it hadn't even registered with Billy that the baby is a boy. That he has a *son*.

Neil and Susan leave, the door clicks shut, and Billy has to sit down. Everything is spinning, the world is moving around him, and he feels like he's going to be sick.

He glances to the side, to the baby who is lying on the towel, moving its legs. *His* legs.

Billy has a son.

To distract himself, because Billy can't *deal* with this right now, he grabs the duffel bag and go through its contents. There's not a lot in there. There are some baby clothes, towels, another blanket. There are a couple of diapers, an opened box of formula and a bottle, which Billy makes a mental note to tell Susan about. (The formula is in powder form, and he only skims through the instructions on the box before his pulse speeds up and he puts it to the side, deciding to not deal with it until he absolutely have to.)

There is an envelope in the bag, too, containing papers. The first one is a birth certificate, where Billy learns that the baby's name is Samuel and that he was born on the first of March, and that's when Billy's hands start shaking. On the same paper, someone has also clearly written 'William Hargrove' on the dotted line after the word 'Father'.

Billy can't see what the other papers say, because everything is suddenly blurry. He feels as if he's going to vibrate out of his skin – but he has no chance to freak out, because the baby lets out another little mewling sound, and when he draws breath to make it into another wail, Billy fumbles to pick him up. Susan picked him up

earlier, and he stopped screaming, right? He has to stop the baby from screaming, if he can – Neil doesn't like too much noise.

3. Billy and the baby

It's a steep learning curve. Billy learns quickly that he can't really stop the baby from screaming, no matter what he does. His father barges into his room later that night, barking at him for keeping the family up when they have work and school tomorrow, and Billy's standing in the middle of his room, holding the baby in tired arms and feeling absolutely desperate because it *won't shut up*. Susan shoulders past Neil and suggests that maybe the baby is hungry, and brings Billy and the baby out into the kitchen where she prepares a bottle of formula. She shows him how to check the temperature by splashing a couple of drops of it on his wrist, and then shows him how to hold the baby while feeding him. Neil huffs but lets her do it, because the baby quiets when he's being fed, and Billy lets out a breath.

When the bottle is empty, Susan shows him how to help the baby burp – and honestly, they can't even burp by themselves? The baby promptly throws up on Billy's shoulder, and then falls asleep on the towel on his bed when he finally puts it down.

Billy doesn't sleep a lot that night. Neither does the baby – not for long periods of time, anyway. Nor, he thinks, does the rest of the family.

In the morning, he's outside the store when it opens, Susan's list in a shaking hand. The baby is in the baby carrier in the passenger seat of the Camaro, because Neil and Susan went to work and Max went to school so he couldn't leave him at home. And now he doesn't know whether to leave him in the car or bring him in, but he eventually brings him into the store with him. Puts the baby carrier in the cart and loads up all the stuff he need around it.

Shit is expensive. He swallows when he pays because this was supposed to be the money that would take him *out of here*, but gratefully nods at the lady manning the check-out when she tells him that there's a coupon for one of the items he bought. She peers into the cart curiously while he fumbles with his wallet, but Billy lets her, because he saves a dollar and ten cents on that coupon.

He doesn't go to school. Instead he spends the day reading through books from the library and fumbling with the baby's diapers and trying to feed him on his own while Neil and Susan is at work and can't see him fail at it. His hands are shaking, but he feels oddly detached. He looks at the baby, and feels nothing but the need to make it through just another hour, and then another, and then another. He doesn't let himself stop, doesn't let himself think any further than that. If he does, he thinks he'll break down, and he can't do that.

Another night with very little sleep follows, and Billy is dead on his feet the following day.

The principal calls the house when he's alone in the house, because Hawkins is a small town and apparently showing up with a baby at the store first thing in the morning is enough for the whole town to be talking about him at nightfall. Man, Billy hates it here.

But the principal calls, and tells Billy that she's heard about Billy's "circumstances," and that she'll send someone over with some work for him. School is the very last thing on Billy's mind right now, but he's still grateful when she tells him that if he can complete the work in his own time, he can still graduate.

A guy he doesn't know, but recognizes as being a year younger than him, brings him some books and homework that afternoon. He looks at Billy strangely when he opens the door, but doesn't say a word except for a mumbled greeting. Even that feels like too much.

Billy doesn't go back to school.

Neil is not happy about have a crying baby in the house, and he makes sure that Billy knows it. Even though Billy quickly learns what to do when the baby cries – feed him, or change his diaper, or burp him, or simply just hold him and rock him gently up and down (although none of these things are guaranteed to work at any given time) – it's never enough for Neil. Never fast enough, never good

enough.

“Do you have any idea what time it is? *Some of us* have a job to go to, or is still attending school.”

And:

“Have you seen the state of the kitchen right now? It’s not Susan’s job to clean up your mess, I suggest you clean it up before dinner.”

And:

“The bathroom is full of your shit – keep your things in your room, that’s why you have a room of your own. The whole family has to share the bathroom, Billy, it’s not just for you.”

And that’s another thing. Neil never mentions the baby. It’s always *Billy* who’s making a mess, *Billy* who’s keeping the family up at night. He only ever acknowledges the baby in the vaguest sense, like when Susan makes a move to help Billy with something, and then he glares at Billy and says “No, Susan, sit down. Billy got himself into this mess. Let him handle it.”

Tensions are high, in the house, from lack of sleep and the disruption from normality. Susan is itching to help, but isn’t allowed. Max is quiet and grumpy, and stays out of the house as much as she can (which, Billy can’t even blame her – he would, too, if he could). Neil has a shorter fuse than usual, which is saying something. And Billy ... Billy is just trying to get through the day.

He’s walking on eggshells when the rest of the family are home, unreasonably afraid to bring Neil’s wrath down upon himself. Neil will still push him up against a wall, or grab him too hard when he’s yelling at him, but Billy has only been slapped once since the baby arrived, and it happened when Neil came home to find Billy sleeping at the kitchen table, school books pushed to the side and the baby sleeping in the baby carrier at his feet.

Neil never gets physical with Billy when he’s holding the baby. But he can’t hold him all the time, and Neil’s mood seems to worsen every time the baby makes a noise.

A week after Billy's life got turned upside down, Billy and the baby moves into the room in the basement, the one where Susan does laundry. Neil puts an army cot in the corner and tells the rest of the family that it's to give Billy a bit more privacy, but no one buys it. Billy knows it's an attempt to put as much distance between him and the rest of the family as possible, but he sucks it up. Makes sure to thank Susan when she hands him a pile of newly-washed bedding, and doesn't look Max in the eye when he walks downstairs that first night – leaving Max standing there, biting her lip, as if she wants to say something but can't muster up the courage.

The thing with babies, though, is that it doesn't seem to matter how much distance you try to put between them and you. If they're in the same house, and cries – especially in a house like this, which isn't really that big? Everyone will hear it. Also, apparently sound travels through the water pipes, because Max complains in the morning that she could hear the baby cry from her *radiator* that night.

Billy's grateful that she at least waits to complain until Neil's out of hearing distance, but he doesn't apologize to her. It's not like he slept, either.

Since Billy's only "lazing about at home every day" – Neil's words – he's expected to help with the housework as well. Between that, and schoolwork, and trying to adjust everything in his life around a *baby*, Billy has zero energy left for anything else. He goes to the store when he needs to stock up on diapers or formula or something else he had no idea a baby even needs, but otherwise stays in the house.

None of his friends from school call, or stop by. He tries not to feel resentful about it, and only succeeds because he's too exhausted.

People tend to whisper about him behind his back when he's at the store, or look at him when they think he's not looking, but most of the time he just musters up whatever energy he's got, and glares at them until they stop. He knows it only lasts until he's out of earshot, though. Things like this doesn't happen in Hawkins, Indiana. He knows he's probably the talk of the town.

When another week has passed, and it's two days before Billy's 18th birthday, Neil walks through the door one evening, looking smug.

"Don't say I never do anything for you," he says, and motions to the window. When Billy looks out from behind the yellow curtains in the kitchen, his heart sinks. There's a caravan parked outside, on the street, and a man is currently busy disconnecting it from his car.

Neil preens, and continues, "I got a real deal on it – the owner was going to leave it at the junk yard. This will be perfect for you. You're a grown man now, and you need your own space." He pats Billy on the back and steers him outside to inspect it while he thanks the man who brought it there.

The inside of the caravan is small. Smaller than Billy's room, smaller than even the laundry room in the basement. It smells like dust and mildew, and everything looks old and outdated. Billy watches, detached, as Neil shows him how he can make the sitting area in the back into a bed where he can sleep at night. "There's lots of room," Neil says.

There's not a lot of room. The sleeping area is bigger than the army cot he's currently sleeping on, yes, and he will be able to put the baby next to him instead of in a nest of towels on the floor, but that's about it. The rest of it is tiny and crammed.

But Neil's standing next to him, staring at him with his eyebrows raised, so Billy licks his lips. Doesn't meet Neil's eyes. Says "Thank you, sir" because he knows that's what he's supposed to say.

Neil claps him on the arm and tells him to help him move it to the backyard.

Together, they manage to park it behind the house, as far away from the house as possible and mostly out of sight from the main street. Neil is in a good mood – downright chipper – but must notice that Billy isn't quite as enthusiastic, because when they're done, he sighs deeply and crosses his arms over his chest.

"You know, Billy, you really should be more grateful. Not many fathers would be so accepting of the shit you're putting this family

through.” Neil’s good mood is gone, and Billy sees the warning signs for what they are. “How many fathers do you think would spend their hard-earned money on such a failure of a son?”

Billy doesn’t bother pointing out that Neil just boasted that he got it for a real good price, or that Billy never asked for this. Instead, he bends his head and says, “I know. Thank you.”

Neil huffs, nods, and claps him on the shoulder. “Well, happy birthday, son.”

It might be an early present, or Neil may not actually know that Billy’s birthday is not until two days from now. Billy swallows, and refuses to think about it.

He and Samuel moves out into the caravan that night.

The people in the house may sleep better for it, but Billy does not. The caravan is cramped, and it doesn’t have electricity or water so every time he needs to use the bathroom or the kitchen, he has to cross the lawn and go inside. If he needs to do it during the night, to warm some formula or something, he has to make extra sure to keep quiet – wouldn’t want to wake the family up, not when Neil has solved that problem so efficiently.

Billy hates to leave the baby in the caravan while he goes inside, but he simply can’t bring him for the risk of him starting to cry.

He’s lucky in that it’s the end of May, so it doesn’t get *very* cold, but he still uses two blankets at night, since it still gets chilly in the caravan. The mattress – which can only barely be called that – is thin, and somehow still manages to be lumpy. He keeps the baby in his nest of soft things next to him on the bed area, and never actually makes it into a sitting area with the table and the benches. No one comes to visit him here anyway, and it’s just extra work. If he needs to sit down, he sits on the bed.

He can still use the house during the days, when Neil and Susan are at work, and he goes inside for meals, but whenever he’s helped

Susan clear the table, Neil will sit down in front of the TV and if the baby makes any kind of noise after this, Neil will turn to Billy and raise his eyebrows meaningfully, as if he's saying 'don't you have your own place now, son?', and Billy – who has learned, finally, to rather be safe than sorry – will take the baby and leave.

He fills the cupboards in the kitchen part of the caravan, as well as the closets and meagre storage space, with some of his things. Clothes and books, mostly. He reads at night, if the baby's asleep, in the light from a flashlight. He keeps all the baby stuff in the caravan – Neil doesn't like to be reminded of his existence.

Billy is struggling. He doesn't get more than a few hours of uninterrupted sleep every night so he's constantly tired. He walks on eggshells around his father, so he's always tense. He avoids with everything he's got to think about the future, because if he does he'll freak out, and he can't afford to do that. Instead, he pushes everything away, and lets his reality narrow down to what he has to do right at this moment; feed the baby, rock the baby, do some homework, change a diaper, clean up after the baby, do chores, feed the baby, burp the baby, change a diaper, go to the store, take an exhausted nap while the baby is sleeping, wake up and change a diaper, feed the baby ... It's an endless cycle of *Have Tos*, which – thankfully – doesn't allow for much time to think.

Once a week, usually on Fridays, he goes to school after all the students have left, and he brings the baby carrier and his books to the principal's office and hands in his assignments. His principal takes them, and usually tries to make small talk while Billy avoids looking her in the eye, before she hands him his assignments for the following week and tells him that 'if he ever needs anything, her door is always open'. Which is bullshit, of course, it's just something she has to say because she's the principal. The first time he was in there, she cooed at the baby and made a move as if to reach out for him. Billy flinched, hard, and then felt himself blush at his own reaction. His principal watched in silence, and hasn't tried to touch any of them since.

Billy misses graduation.

Or, rather, decides that he doesn't care enough to show up and have to face everyone who's probably been talking about him behind his back for a month now. At least he gets good grades, whatever good that will do him.

He picks up his diploma from the principal, the day before the ceremony, and has to concentrate hard to be able to tune out her watered-down version of an inspiring speech. He hears something about his 'bright future' and snorts so loud that he wakes the baby. Good thing, too, because then he can focus on that rather than the way he half want to cry, half want to laugh hysterically at the way all of his plans that he had for his future has crumbled to dust.

He stuffs the envelope with the diploma into the side of the baby carrier, and stops at the gas station on the way home. He splurges on a pack of cigarettes, and chain smokes three of them on the side of the road before continuing home.

Predictably, not much changes with school being out, except that the likelihood of running into someone from school increases when he goes to the store. After a couple of awkward encounters where there is eye contact, but no words, he learns to go earlier in the day. Right when the store opens, preferably – those of his classmates that haven't snagged a summer job aren't very likely to be up at that time.

But. Billy's eighteen now, and he's out of school, and even though Neil gifted him the caravan, Billy still uses the house and eats their food. This is a problem, apparently. Neil tells him, one day, that he better think about getting a job, because Neil sure won't pay for his food and board anymore.

"You're an adult now," he says, having barged into the caravan while Billy was busy feeding the baby, "and you better act like one. A real man doesn't leech off other people – he makes sure to provide for his family." Billy wants to laugh in his face, because apparently that means that he's not considered family anymore – but Neil is currently towering over him and Billy's at a disadvantage; sitting down and holding a baby. He doesn't want to risk Neil's wrath.

Neil nods at Billy's silence. "If you were grown up enough to have a kid, then you're grown up enough to support yourself. You live on my property, you use my kitchen and bathroom, you do laundry in my house, you eat my food. It's only fair that you start paying your way, don't you think?"

Neil is leaning over him, so Billy swallows and nods. The baby fusses in his lap, but he can't look down. Can't look away from his father.

"I think 150 dollars a month is fair, don't you?" says Neil, as if he's not totally upending Billy's life.

The air is punched out of Billy's lungs, and he's only barely aware of nodding. Agreeing. Anything, anything to make his father happy so he'll *leave*. So Billy can fall to pieces without Neil seeing, and judging him for it.

Neil leaves, and Billy gently puts the baby down next to him on the bed, and leans forward to hide his face in his hands. He tries to breathe slowly, but he can't, he *can't*. He feels something like panic rise up in his throat, because he can't afford to pay Neil 150 dollars a month. Having to pay for everything for Samuel is already rapidly draining his savings, he can't afford to pay for food and rent, too. He'll have to get a job. But how the *fuck* is he going to be able to get a job, when he has to take care of a *baby*? He wants to hit something, he wants to yell, he's so frustrated and scared that all he wants to do is scream and cry and *break* ...

Samuel makes a noise next to him; Billy recognizes it as a precursor to crying. Oddly, that makes him calm down. Yet again, he pushes the panic down. Instead he swallows and blinks a couple of times before picking him up.

"Shhh," he says, rocking the baby like Susan taught him. "Don't cry. Don't cry. It'll be okay."

He doesn't know if he's talking to Samuel, or himself. Either way, none of them cry that night, so he counts it as a win.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, listen, I know Billy's struggling now and Neil's an ass, but things are gonna get better soon. Don't worry. Happy endings only.

4. Billy and Frank

Notes for the Chapter:

About time we introduce some good people into Billy's life, don't you think?

Turns out that finding work isn't as easy as Neil made it sound. Billy spends the next couple of days trying to get a job – any job – but it's a small town. Everyone has heard of his situation, and even if they hadn't, Billy has to bring Samuel along because he has no one he can leave him with while he goes job-hunting. Neil and Susan are working during the day, and Max is too young to babysit – even though she actually offered, which seemed to surprise them both. Unfortunately, Neil had heard her, and was quick to forbid it. “No Maxine, you're much too young. Besides, this is Billy's mess to deal with, not yours.” Billy gritted his teeth against the urge to talk back.

So he brings the baby along. It draws a lot of attention, and Billy grinds his teeth against the humiliation of having to endure everyone's eyes on him when he walks through the door. He's been to every local shop, as well as some offices, both diners, the garage, the public pool – he even applies for jobs as a cleaner, and a trash collector.

Everyone says no. Some of them look down their nose at him, and he knows that they're judging him – he flips them off when he closes the door behind him – and some of them look at him with pity in their eyes. He doesn't know which is worse.

The point is that the kind of work he can do is limited if he has to bring a baby, and even those who *doesn't* look at him as if he's lesser than them, tells him that that simply won't work. Bringing a baby if you're working in a store? An office? The *garage*? It can't be done.

One woman tells him that he better get a babysitter, and he considers it, at least until he starts looking around and finds that most babysitters don't accept *actual babies*. And also, that none of them are available for whole days. Or maybe they're just not available for *him*.

By the time Neil's looks start to turn from disappointed for not landing a job to openly hostile for being a failure of a human being, Billy is at the end of his rope. But then, one morning when he's sitting in his car, waiting for the store to open – Samuel had been fussy all night and hadn't really fallen asleep until Billy put him in the car and started driving around town at five in the morning, and by then he figured he'd save on gas and just park in the store parking lot and snooze for a bit – a white van drives up to the building, and parks at the side of the building. Billy, who's leaned his seat back and is holding Samuel against his chest – it seems to make him sleep better – blinks his eyes open, because it's too early for anyone to be here, the store doesn't open for another hour.

Then he sees the logo of the van. *The Bakery*, in light blue swirly text. Apparently, Hawkins has only ever had the one bakery, and by the time someone thought that they should name it something, everyone was already calling it "The Bakery," and they just never bothered to change it.

Billy notices this with little to no interest, and closes his eyes again. Only to jump like a foot in the air an undetermined amount of time later, when there's a knock on the driver's side window. Staring out the window reveals a guy in his sixties, who – when Billy's calmed down enough to notice, and his heart is no longer trying to escape through his throat – is the same man who drove the van that Billy just noticed.

The man motions for Billy to roll down the window, and after a moment of hesitation, Billy does. The movement makes Samuel twitch, and without thinking Billy puts his other hand on Samuel's back, to soothe him. He was awake most of the night, after all; Billy really doesn't want him to wake up again. It's a wonder he didn't startle awake when Billy did, just now.

The man's eyes follow his movement, and his eyes softens.

"You're Billy, right?" he says. Billy nods, suspicious. He only rolled his window down a little, enough to hear what the man has to say but not enough for the man to reach in and grab him.

"I'm Frank," the man says. "I own The Bakery. I heard you've been

around town, looking for a job?”

Billy doesn't dare feel hope. He nods, mutely.

“I might have something for you,” the man – Frank – says. “If you can start early. Like, *middle of the night* early. And work hard.”

Billy licks his lips. “I can work hard.” And then he looks down at Samuel, because he would rather get this out of the way now, before getting his hopes up. “But I have ...”

“That's okay,” the man says, and when Billy looks up, startled, there's a soft expression on his face. “This little guy? Is not a problem.” And then he smiles, because he must see something on Billy's face – astonishment, maybe – and continues, “Come by The Bakery when you're done here. Let's have a chat.”

With that, he pats the roof of the Camaro twice, and turns to leave. Billy watches him go. Samuel's been drooling on his shirt, and Billy's still half-lying in his seat. He probably has bags under his eyes, and needs a shave and a shower and hell, clean clothes. He probably gave the man the worst possible first impression – why would he want to give Billy a job? With the way people in town look at him, talk about him? Who would want to hire Billy?

But he goes, of course he does. When he's done his shopping and put his bags in the backseat of the Camaro and put Samuel's baby carrier – with Samuel still sleeping, thankfully – in the passenger seat, he drives over to The Bakery. It's been open since seven, but there are no customers there, only Frank behind the counter. Billy's pulled a hand through his hair, trying to tame it, and buttoned his shirt all the way up. He can't do anything about the stain or the stubble, but he stands up straight and looks Frank in the eye and shakes his hand firmly, like Neil taught him.

They talk. Samuel, blessedly, sleeps through the whole thing.

Frank has owned The Bakery for more than twenty-five years, but his daughter, who lives in Chicago, just had twins, and his wife has been

telling him to find help, so that they'll be able to spend more time there. A bakery is not the right place for someone who wants to take days off, especially if you're the owner, and apparently the guy who used to help him with deliveries before is moving across the country.

The job he offers Billy is this: Start working at three am, prep the doughs (Frank will teach him), bake the bread and cakes and cookies (Frank will teach him this, too), help Frank pack up when he arrives, later in the morning, and then do the deliveries. Then he'll come back and help clean up. If he's quick, he'll be out of there by ten am, but he should count on eleven, just to be on the safe side.

"Can you do that?" Frank asks, and maybe he sees something on Billy's face because he specifies, "I mean, obviously I don't expect you to know how to do all that yet. I'll show you the ropes before I let you do it alone. But it's hard work. Rough hours. You think you can handle it?"

Billy needs a job, *desperately*, so he nods even before Frank finishes speaking. He can do hard work, and he is already doing rough hours. But there's one thing that he can't do. "I don't have a babysitter," he says and looks down at the baby carrier, where Samuel is sleeping. For some reason, Billy's eyes burn. "I can't ... I can't leave him."

He prepares for rejection, for the 'oh, sorry then, too bad' that he is sure will follow. He is wholly unprepared for Frank getting out of his chair and crouching on the floor, knees creaking. He watches as the older man leans in over the baby carrier, and how a smile spreads over his face as he watches Samuel sleep.

"Oh it won't be a problem, I'm sure," Frank says, which steals the breath out of Billy. "He's just a tiny little thing, isn't he? He won't take up much space. There's a back room where you can keep him, and you can keep an eye on him while you work if you keep the door open."

That is ... perfect. More than perfect. And Billy can't ... he doesn't understand. He's spent the last week growing increasingly agitated, increasingly stressed out. He's been rejected so many times, has met with so many people who has looked down on him, pitied him and judged him, that he can barely understand that someone ... isn't

doing those things.

“Thank you,” he says, and his voice is raspy. He blinks, furiously, and clears his throat. “Thank you.”

His eyes are still blurry when he stands up and shakes Frank’s hand, and Frank moves to show him around.

Somehow, he makes it work. Two days later Billy sets his alarm for 2 am, and bundles Samuel up in the baby carrier and puts it in the front seat of the Camaro before driving over to The Bakery, where he meets with Frank, who starts instructing him right away. The first week, he works side by side with Frank, who teaches him how to make all kinds of dough; how to mix it and work it and shape it into loaves, buns, sweet cakes and cookies. He learns how to work the ovens, he learns how long every kind of bread should bake, he learns the cleanup. They write a lot of notes, and tape them up everywhere so Billy will remember everything.

During the first two days when Billy’s still learning, Frank gets his wife to come down and man the counter while he drives Billy around town in the van to show him all the places that he delivers bread to. On the third day, he sends him off by himself. (Or, well. Samuel’s in his baby carrier in the passenger seat, of course, but there’s no one to ask if he needs help.)

Frank didn’t lie. It is hard work, but it’s also kind of perfect for his situation. It’s a paying job where he doesn’t have a lot of contact with people, and he can bring Samuel with him to work. Samuel spends his time in the back room, and it’s warm and cozy and he can sleep in his nest of pillows and blankets while Billy keeps the door open and check on him every ten minutes or so. And if he wakes up or cries or needs some formula or a diaper change, Billy can do that without people staring at him. Frank doesn’t say anything, during that first week, when Billy has to stop what he’s doing to check on the baby. If anything, Frank looks like he wants to help, but Billy doesn’t let him. He hears Neil’s voice in his head, repeating that ‘he has to take care of his own messes’, and besides, while Frank seems to be a good person, they don’t know each other that well yet.

And Frank is his boss. Billy wants to make a good impression; show that he can handle this.

When he gets off work for the day, he usually takes care of any shopping that needs to be done, and then he goes back home. The house is usually empty, if Max isn't there, and he can do his chores – because of course he's still expected to do them – and use the kitchen and the laundry room to his heart's content. In the evenings, he joins the family for dinner, and then excuses himself for an early night. He usually stumbles into bed by seven, and if he's lucky he'll get two hours of uninterrupted sleep before Samuel wakes him up the first time.

It's harsh. But he manages. The best thing about it is that it gets Neil off his back, and also that it makes it so that he really only sees his father during dinners.

The first night he works by himself, he burns a tray of wheat buns when he is busy changing a diaper, and then burns his own wrist when he rushes to take it out of the oven. He yells and swears and kicks a cupboard, and then he takes a deep breath and runs his hand under the cold tap until it stops smarting. He throws the buns away, and starts over.

Frank definitely sees the burned buns in the trash when he shows up, around six thirty, but he doesn't say a thing. Just helps Billy pack up the day's deliveries in the van, and tells him to drive safe.

Billy's been a very safe driver ever since the first time he put Samuel in his car.

Driving a rickety old van around town, too early in the morning, shouldn't be as soothing as it is, but Billy finds that he likes it. Now, he *loves* his Camaro – really, he does – but it doesn't exactly allow for anonymous cruising. Everyone knows his car, and who drives it.

Everyone knows The Bakery's van, too, but either people hasn't figured out that it's him driving it yet (he's not sure if Frank has actually told anyone that he hired Billy), or it's just a car that they're

used to seeing around town, which means they don't react to it. In the van, Billy is basically invisible. He wouldn't have thought, two months ago, that he'd be grateful about people not noticing him.

Samuel goes with him on all his deliveries. Frank offered to watch him, once, but when Billy refused he just nodded in acceptance, and didn't ask again. The delivery run – to the café, to the diners, to the grocery stores, to the new mall – takes maybe an hour and a half, and if Samuel is asleep (which he often is, the sound from an engine seems to put him to sleep like nothing else) he usually helps whoever's there to meet him to carry everything inside. Doris – the fifty year old world-weary waitress at the diner North of Hawkins – gave him a piece of pie as a thank you on the first day, and thus climbed to the top five of Billy's favorite people in Hawkins.

She climbs to top three (only surpassed by Max and Frank) when she makes a habit out of offering Billy a smoke before he drives off. They stand behind the building, next to the back door, and smoke together, while Billy keeps the passenger side door open so he can keep an eye on Samuel.

Frank pays him every two weeks, on Thursdays. Cash, in an envelope, as per Billy's request – even though Frank told him he would help him open a bank account, if he wanted to – and Billy feels downright rich as he stops by the side of the road on the way home the first time he gets paid. He squirrels away some of it – hides it with the rest of his dwindling savings in a plastic bag stuffed inside an old sneaker in the trunk of the Camaro – and it's good that he does, because Neil is waiting for him in the caravan when he gets home.

Billy can count on one hand the number of times Neil has been inside the caravan, and he hasn't set foot in there for the last couple of weeks. Billy had begun to feel safe here, so to find Neil waiting for him as he walks in is ... disconcerting. Neil is standing next to the sleeping area, leaning on the counter where Billy usually changes diapers. Billy freezes in the tiny doorway, in the middle of trying to wrestle the baby carrier inside while also trying to keep his hold on a bag of day-old bread that Frank is usually nice enough to let him bring home.

"Hello, son," Neil says, smiling. "Thought I'd come by and see how you're doing." He looks around in the cramped space, at the way every available surface is packed full of stuff, at the un-made bed, the dirty towels and baby clothes waiting for Billy to bring them inside and do laundry.

Billy swallows and doesn't say anything.

"It seems that you're doing fine," Neil continues. "All grown up, huh?" He pushes off the counter and walks up to Billy, who would have backed up if there had been space to do so. As it is, he just pushes himself up against the cupboard next to the door, holding the baby carrier in both hands and twisting his torso slightly to angle it – and Samuel – away from Neil. "You know what all grown men living on someone else's property has to do, don't you Billy?"

And Billy knows where this is going, so he nods, but Neil tells him anyway.

"They pay rent. Now, today is pay day, isn't it?"

Billy nods again, without speaking. He doesn't think he could, if he tried – there's a lump in his throat that's making it hard to breathe, let alone form words. Wordlessly, he puts the baby carrier down on the floor – as far away as he can without making it obvious – and reaches back with one hand to bring out the envelope, which he stuffed in his back pocket.

He intends to count out the 150 dollars that Neil said he wanted, but the envelope is snatched out of his grip and he just stands there and watches as Neil opens it, hums and counts through the bills inside. He takes out a wad of cash, folds them once and puts them in his breast pocket. Then he turns to Billy and smiles, while smacking the – much thinner – envelope into his chest. Billy takes it, fingertips tingling, and when Neil pushes past him to get out, he opens it to find a measly 15 dollars left in the envelope.

Over the years, he has learned when to shut up. To grind his teeth together, and not say a word. To just accept it, and move on. But in the midst of his already very unfair life, this seems to be *particularly* unfair – he worked for that money, and Neil said, Neil *said* ...

“You said 150.”

Neil is already halfway across the lawn, but at Billy’s words, he stops. Turns around slowly. Billy holds his breath, but doesn’t look away.

“I did,” Neil says. “150 dollars a month. It’s June. You’ve been living in the caravan since May. Before that, you were in *my house*. Were you going to skip rent for May, son?”

Billy’s eyes are burning. Instinct has him shaking his head, but something else – maybe Samuel, making small noises from the floor – makes him lick his lips, speak again. “I need money for the baby.” He doesn’t know if he’s stating a fact, or begging. Maybe both.

“What have I always said, son? *Rent first*. A place to live is *always* the priority.” As if he didn’t force Billy out of the house, weeks ago. “If you need more money, then maybe you have to work harder.” He raises his eyebrows. “Or maybe your employer can give you an advance.” When Billy opens his mouth to speak, he adds, “Don’t look at me like that, son. I’m just teaching you how the world works.”

And that’s that. He turns, walks back to the house, and closes the back door behind him after he gets inside. Leaving Billy in his caravan, with 15 dollars in an envelope, and Samuel fussing in the baby carrier at his feet. When Samuel starts crying, Billy numbly picks him up and rocks him. Samuel needs a diaper change, so he focuses on that instead of the urge to punch a hole through the cupboard door.

The next morning, Frank sees Billy scrub furiously at his eyes and asks what’s wrong. And Billy has only been there for two weeks, and so far he’s been really good at keeping things professional. He’s come to work, done his job to the best of his ability, and gone home. When Frank has been talking about his wife and his kids and his grandkids and random people in town, Billy has nodded along or offered a smile, but never volunteered any information about his own life.

He’s eighteen years old with a kid. Everyone knows that, and no one is probably interested in knowing anything else about him.

So it's shocking when Frank sits him down in one of the two chairs in the back room and brings him a cup of coffee, claiming they both need an early break, and somehow makes Billy tell him what happened. Billy wasn't *going to*. He was going to shrug and say that things are fine and that he's just tired (which is not a lie; he didn't sleep well), but before he knows it, he's admitted to his *boss* that his dad took his paycheck and he can feel his throat constrict and he clamps his mouth shut in panic. He *wasn't going to say anything*.

"And he charges you 150 dollars a month to have that caravan parked in his back yard, and for you to use his kitchen?" Frank asks, incredulous.

"And the bathroom," Billy says, and winces at how he makes it sound like he's defending Neil. "And the ... washing machine."

"Kid," Frank says, and leans his elbows on the table, "you can park that thing in the lot behind the bakery, no charge. There's a laundromat not far from here, you know. And ..." He points at the electric plate that they use to make coffee. "Kitchen." He points with his thumb over his shoulder, to where the bathroom is. "Bathroom." Then he frowns, probably considering all the cleaning supplies that has been stuffed into the tiled corner of the bathroom. "And, well, if we clean it up a bit, there's a shower in there, too."

Billy ... is kind of rendered speechless. "Are ... are you serious?"

Frank shrugs. "No skin off my back, kid. You have the key to this place already, you could get in whenever you needed to."

Unsaid; he trusts Billy. After just a couple of weeks, Frank *trusts* him.

Frank continues, "You might save on gas, too, not having to drive to work every day. And maybe get half an hour more of sleep – don't think I haven't seen those bags under your eyes. Those things look heavier than our flour sacks."

"Well," Billy says, stalling, while his mind is reeling with the possibilities. "That might not change for a while." They both look down at Samuel, who's sleeping in his nest of soft things in the corner, looking deceptively peaceful and very unlike the red-faced,

loudly wailing terror he'd been last night. When Billy looks back up, he catches Frank smile at the sight before him.

"I remember when our daughter was this age," Frank says, almost wistfully. "It was the worst year of our lives in many ways – my wife's mother had just died, and I'd just taken over this place and it wasn't going very well. I worked all the time, my wife had to take care of her father ... and we had the baby. I don't think I slept more than three hours a night for a whole year." He glances at Billy. "But it's worth it. More than worth it. Looking back, yeah, it was ... it was hellish at times. But I wouldn't change a thing."

He stands up, and claps a hand to Billy's shoulder while ignoring his flinch. "You'll be okay, kid. Now, what do you say about relocating that caravan of yours?"

Billy's eyes are stinging, but he manages a smile. "Yeah. Sounds good." He takes a breath, clears his throat and looks his boss in the eye. "Thanks, Frank."

Frank helps him move the caravan the next day. The Bakery is closed during Saturday and Sundays, except for special events – Frank tells Billy that in 1979, he spent nine weekends in a row baking for seven weddings and three funerals, and since then he insists on at least one weekend off per month – and it's perfectly timed, since Neil took Susan and Max to a fair of some sort, some kind of family outing that Billy wasn't invited to.

He doesn't mind. Not when it gives him a chance to pack up his stuff without Neil hovering. He takes everything that he needs from his room that he hasn't already moved out into the caravan, and Frank backs up his car –bigger than the Camaro – to the Hargrove backyard so they can hook up the caravan to it. It leaves muddy tire tracks in the grass which makes Billy wince – Neil won't like it – but Frank waves him off.

"For 150 dollars, he can rake over a couple of tracks in his lawn. Besides, no one will even see it back here."

It seems like Frank is not Neil's biggest fan, and that's without even meeting him. It makes Billy feel warm.

Just when they're about to leave – Frank is already in the driver's seat next to Samuel in the baby carrier, and Billy is exiting the caravan after making sure that everything is strapped in properly – Neil's truck turns onto the street. Billy turns cold all over, but calmly closes the door to the caravan and locks it, just in time for Neil to slow his car down on the street and stop right in front of Billy.

In the backseat, he can see Max pressed up against the window. Her mouth is open, her eyes are wide, and her gaze flicks from Billy to Frank's car to the house, and back to Billy again.

Billy doesn't look at her – he keeps his eyes on Neil, who slowly rolls down his window. He looks at Billy without saying anything for a long time, but then he glances over at Frank's car and says, simply, "You're leaving?"

Billy, who half expects Neil to make a scene – to forbid him from going, to tell him that the caravan still belongs to him, to get out of the car and punch him in the face – nods. His mouth is dry.

Neil give a little nod of his own, and then reaches his arm out through the window, palm up. For a second, Billy thinks that he's offering a handshake. Parting on amicable terms or something. But before he can reach out his own hand, Neil motions with his fingers in a 'gimme' motion. "Your keys."

And it shouldn't feel like he's been punched in the gut, but it does. A gasp escapes him, and he clamps his mouth shut to stop himself from embarrassing himself further. Jaw tight, he reaches into his pocket and brings out his keys; to the Camaro, to the caravan, to the house. He unhooks the house key from the others, and places it in Neil's hand.

Their fingers don't even touch. Neil pulls his arm back and rolls up his window. Max is saying something, but Billy can't hear it over the white noise in his head. He sees Susan lean forward slightly in the passenger side window, and for a second he meets her eyes. Then Neil puts his hands back on the steering wheel and the car starts

moving again. Turns into the driveway, parks in front of the house.

Leaves Billy standing in the street.

Max calls out his name as soon as she gets out of the truck, but Neil says something and Susan puts her hands on Max's shoulders and turns her to the house. Billy swallows and turns his back before he has to see his father and Susan and Max move as a family into the house that was never his home, and close the door on Billy for good. Instead, he walks up to Frank's car and gets in the back, since the baby carrier is in the front. Frank doesn't start the car right away.

"You good?" he asks.

Billy nods. Swallows again. Nods again. "Yeah." It might be a lie, but. He hopes that if he says it enough times, it'll become truth.

They park the caravan behind The Bakery, in the small parking lot that no one actually uses. There are brick walls on three sides and a chain-link fence behind some tall bushes on the fourth, and there's a dumpster in the other corner, but it's literally ten steps from The Bakery's back door, and more importantly – it's free. Frank claps Billy on the shoulder, and just before he gets in his car to drive home to his wife, he says, "Oh, and I've got a surprise for you! Check the bathroom."

With that, and a jovial 'I'll see you on Monday', he drives off.

And Billy is alone. Well, he amends when Samuel starts crying, *he and Samuel* are alone.

"What else is new," he mutters to himself, and picks Samuel up, wincing at the loud wailing so close to his ear. His crying has increased in volume in the last couple of weeks, and Billy figures that if he hadn't left, then it would only have been a matter of time before Neil would have forced him out, anyway.

But he doesn't want to think about that, so instead he walks inside the caravan and changes Samuel's diaper – surprised to find that he can't remember the last time he felt the urge to gag while doing so –

and then gets rid of the soiled one immediately, in the dumpster just outside. Sure, he now lives in a parking lot crammed in between some blocky buildings, but it's already better than the back yard at Cherry Lane. The ease at which he can throw out the trash is definitely a bonus.

Samuel is still fussy with a clean diaper, so Billy puts him against his chest and carries him with him when he uses his keys – it still amazes him, that Frank trusted him with this – to let himself into The Bakery. He has his little saucepan that he stole from Susan (it was too small anyway, she never used it now when there were four – or three – of them in the family), and brings the powdered formula with him, the empty bottle stuffed under his arm. The little electric plate might not be adequate for cooking a three-course meal, but it'll be enough for Billy to keep Samuel fed, and heat up some canned soup for himself. He's got access to enough bread to eat sandwiches every day, and Frank cleared out half a shelf in the big fridge where they keep the ingredients for him to keep his stuff.

A space just for him. It's more than he had at Cherry.

He rocks Samuel gently while he prepares the bottle one-handed, and then sits down at the little table and gets comfortable. Samuel quiets and eats greedily, and Billy realizes that ... he's relaxed. Relaxed, in a way he hasn't been since before that night, a month and a half ago, when Neil dragged him into the backyard and beat him up.

The back room is small, with no windows, and the wallpapers are yellow and slightly stained, but Billy feels more at home here than he ever did under Neil's roof. At least here, he won't have to worry about Neil barging in – he made sure that the door locked behind him when he walked inside. He has a job, he has a place that is relatively safe ...

He exhales. Leans his head back against the wall and closes his eyes, just for a couple of seconds. Samuel is warm in his arms, and he can hear him sucking down the formula, can feel the tug on the bottle.

For the first time, he entertains the thought that maybe, just maybe, he will be able to *do this*. For more than just another day.

When Samuel starts twisting his head away, Billy puts the bottle away and puts the baby on his shoulder, gently patting his backside like Susan showed him. He doesn't know why burping a baby is important, but a couple of times when he's forgotten about it, Samuel has thrown up on him, and that's honestly incentive enough.

It's not until he's about to go back outside that he remembers what Frank said about checking out the bathroom.

The bathroom is small and consists of a toilet, a sink with a small mirror hanging over it, a mismatching storage closet full of cleaning supplies, and a tiled corner that was once a shower and which has been used for storage up until now.

Now, though, it's clean. There are no boxes, no brooms, no spare fluorescent lamps. Billy has no idea where Frank put it all, but the bathroom is empty of all the extra stuff and by the looks of things, the tiles have even been scrubbed clean. The showerhead gleams as if new, and everything smells strongly of something citrus-y.

And as if that wasn't enough, the storage closet has been removed and in its place stands a wooden changing table. Billy strongly suspects that it was once a baking table or something. Now, there's a layer of soft foam underneath a water-proof fabric covering the whole thing, and lining the sides of it.

There's also some things on the table. A pile of neatly folded wash cloths. A stuffed animal – a purple dolphin, made of velvet. A small battery powered radio. Two cans of beer and a bag of chips.

Billy lets out a laugh that sounds suspiciously like a sob, and has to take a couple of deep breaths to get his breathing under control.

Neil made Billy keep all of Samuel's things – and his own – in his room, or later in the caravan, because he wanted them out of the way and out of sight. And Frank – his boss, who he has known for a grand total of two weeks – has gone out of his way to give Billy and Samuel space. In the parking lot, in the back room, in the fridge, in the bathroom.

“Two weeks, Sam,” Billy says, and doesn't realize until the words are

out of his mouth, that he's talking to the baby. "Can you believe it?"

If Samuel believes it or not is unclear, as he's already falling asleep. He's changed, he's full, he's warm – *he's safe*, Billy's mind supplies – and he snuffles softly into Billy's shoulder. Billy finds himself smiling as he walks back out to the parking lot, and back into his current home. He's still smiling when he puts Samuel to bed, in his nest of blankets in the corner of the sleeping area. Then he takes a second trip to the bakery, to retrieve the beers, the bag of chips, the radio and the purple dolphin. He puts the dolphin next to Samuel. It's longer than he is, but it's soft and has friendly, sewed-on eyes. Watching over him while he sleeps.

Billy sits down on the other side of the sleeping area, and pulls his legs up under him. Leans back. Fiddles with the little radio until he finds a station that isn't playing pop music – he still has his own stereo, but that runs on electricity and he hasn't got that here – and makes sure it's low enough that it won't wake Samuel up. And then he cracks open a beer, and opens the bag of chips ... and allows himself to feel like a teenager, if only for a little while.

5. Billy and Sam

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter has *fantastic* accompanying art by Gravegroves, which you can see [here](#).

That night is the first night that he sleeps more than four uninterrupted hours since the start of May. He wakes up only once during the night, when Samuel is hungry. He walks inside and feeds him (it's even closer than at Cherry, which is saying something), but both of them fall back asleep soon enough after, which is also a first. It's like they're both less tense, just from putting some distance between them and the house on Cherry Lane.

When Billy wakes up in the morning, he does so slowly. Blinks his eyes open and stretches out as far as he can reach in the cramped space he's in – he has taken to sleeping diagonally across the bed, with Samuel's baby nest in the corner. That both gives Billy a chance to stretch out without his feet hanging out over the edge of the bed, and keeps Samuel safe in the corner without risking Billy rolling over and crushing him in his sleep.

It's rare, that Billy wakes up while Samuel is still asleep – usually, he wakes up to crying or fussing, and needs to immediately take some kind of action. But now, Billy's blinking against the early morning light filtering in through the dirty plastic windows, and he finds himself lying on his side, looking at the baby sleeping beside him.

There's something strangely familiar about the whole scene, something that he can't quite put his finger on. He doesn't get it until he suddenly *does* – until he blinks his eyes open and sits up, scrambles for the kitchen part of the caravan where he stuffed most of his things into the cupboards when he packed it all up.

He finds his mom's old photo album in the bottom of one, wrapped in a plastic bag along with some old letters and postcards addressed to his mother, from various friends and acquaintances. She didn't take them with her when she left, and Billy kept them for the longest time, hoping that she would come back for them – for him – but she never

did. He hasn't looked through them in years, but also hasn't had the heart to throw them away.

Now, though, now he opens up the photo album again, just like he used to do when he was a kid. But unlike then, he doesn't pause to look at the first half of it – yellowed, pale photos of his mother, young, with her friends and her family, smiling at the camera – and he also makes sure to turn past the pages where Neil starts showing up. Those are not the important ones right now. What he's looking for is further back.

There are pictures from her and Neil's wedding. Pictures of his mother proudly showing off her big belly. And then, when Billy turns another page – pictures of Billy as a baby.

He brings the album over to the bed, and sits down on the edge of the mattress, putting the album over his knees and tracing the pages with his finger while letting himself remember.

Billy's mom used to say that he was the most beautiful baby in the entire world. That when he smiled, people couldn't help but smile back; that when he laughed, it sounded like angels singing; that when he opened his eyes in the morning and looked at her, the sky and the ocean paled in comparison to the blue of his eyes.

She always said the same thing, when they looked through the album together – repeated it so often that Billy can remember all of it now, a decade later.

She said that the cutest part of him was his nose. His 'little button nose'. She used to call him Billy Button, and he has vague memories of being embarrassed about it. Maybe she would have continued to call him that, just to tease him, but ... she left, and no one ever called him that again.

But there is a picture. In the album, there's this picture, of Billy sleeping. On his back, his arms splayed out on either side, mouth a tiny triangle, open just a tad. He had long lashes, even as a baby. And his nose – his little button nose – looked like Samuel's nose.

They look the same.

He leans down low on the unmade bed, so that he's almost lying down again, and looks at Samuel from the same angle as the photo is taken from – really *looks* at him. Then he compares it to the photo that his mother took of him when he was this age. And he's always thought that all babies look alike, but – the nose, it's the same shape. Samuel's got the long lashes, too. The little dip in his upper lip. Even the ears look the same.

Tears well up in Billy's eyes, and he's helpless to stop them. It hasn't actually hit him until now, that Samuel is *his*. He is Sam's *dad*, his *parent* – Sam is his own flesh and blood. And Billy realizes, quite suddenly and with a resolve that scares him, that he will do *anything* to protect him.

It's like being hit by a truck, the realization. He doesn't understand where the feeling came from, but he's powerless against it. It has him picking Sam up, jostling him a little but not waking him up completely, so he can put him in his lap, still wrapped in his blanket. Billy needs to look at him, drink in his features, just try to come to terms with everything that is whirling around inside him and is trying to settle. There's a feeling in his chest that isn't anger, isn't guilt or stress or worry – it's *wonder*, and it blooms like a flower in his heart and warms him up from the inside. Quite without realizing it, a tear falls onto Sam's sleeping face.

He twitches in his sleep, scrunches his face up, and Billy lets out a wet laugh, surprising himself. It surprises Sam, too, because he makes the face he does when he's about to start crying, even without opening his eyes.

Billy laughs (and it sounds like a sob) and reaches out and brushes the tear from his face with his thumb. "Hey now," he says, voice thick with emotion, "Don't cry, there we go. All better." When he draws his hand back, he nudges Sam's tiny little hand with his pinkie, because he's so small and his hands are so small and his fingernails are so *incredibly* small ... and then he stops breathing when Sam's tiny little fingers wrap around his finger, and hold on.

Sam's been holding on to his fingers before. But it has never felt like *this*. Like his heart is swelling in his chest and pushing everything else aside, not even leaving room for his lungs to draw breath.

He wiggles his finger a little, and watches as Sam's arm moves, too. Sam doesn't cry – sufficiently distracted by this new thing that is Billy's finger – and his grip is firm, for a baby's. He doesn't let go.

Neither will I, Billy thinks, while tears run down his face and falls off his chin. *I won't ever let go.*

He doesn't have words for what he's feeling, sitting there on the edge of his bed in a crappy caravan, crying; eighteen years old and holding his infant son. But whatever the feeling is, it's big.

Sam makes a series of complicated faces – Billy will probably have to change his diaper soon – and ends up smiling. Billy can hear his mother's words echoing in his head, and has no choice but to smile back at the baby. He *has* to; he's helpless against it.

There's something else that Sam got from Billy, too. Billy's breath catches in his throat when Sam opens his eyes and looks at him with those blue eyes.

His mother was right; the sky *does* pale in comparison.

With that realization, everything changes. But at the same time, nothing does. Billy still wakes up in the middle of the night, goes inside, goes to work. He does his job, exchanges pleasantries (and later banter) with Frank, takes care of Sam – and he eats and he sleeps and he doesn't go back home and tries not to think about how no one has come to visit him or make sure that he's alright (Neil hasn't been in touch, not even to make demands about the caravan – he's probably just glad that Billy and Sam are out of his hair, so he can start over with his *real* family; the one Billy was never a part of, no matter how much he tried).

But what changes is, that Sam becomes his number one priority. Or, Sam has been his number one priority for the last month and a half, but it was out of necessity, not because he chose it.

Well, he's choosing it now.

He stops hiding. The baby carrier is good for transporting Samuel in

the car, but it also limits what Billy can do, since he has to hold it in one hand. So when Frank suggests one of those harness baby carrier things, Billy eventually gets one (second-hand, of course). It allows him to strap Samuel to his own chest so he can use both hands when he goes to the store, or to the gas station, or just out on a walk.

Because yes, Billy goes on *walks* now. Partly to save on gas when he needs to get somewhere, but also – it's summer. It's nice outside. And while he doesn't have anyone to hang out with, he figures that both he and Sam probably need to see something else than the inside of the caravan or the grocery store or The Bakery's back room.

Plus, part of Billy thrives on being contrary.

When people see him, carrying his son around (his *son*! The thought never fails to make Billy's heart beat double time these days), they don't seem to know how to react. They've seen him around town before, of course, with Sam – but Billy was trying to make himself small, then. Invisible. Like he was ashamed, and in a way he *was*.

Not anymore, though. The circumstances may not have been ideal, but Billy – and Lisa – didn't do anything wrong. Sam *definitely* didn't – he didn't choose to be born. So Billy carries Sam around town, pointedly *not hiding*, and people are ... confused. Some of them seem to think that Billy's doing something wrong just by being out in the open. But some are friendly enough, and offer him a smile or a nod. Most of them, after the initial confusion, just pretend that they don't notice that he's carrying around a baby, and ignore them both. That suits Billy just fine.

He keeps seeing people from school around town, and he knows that they are talking about him behind his back. He sees them stare and point, hears their giggles and whispers, and he has to clench his teeth to stop himself from speaking out. Because what is there to say, really? He and the other people his age live vastly different lives, now.

None of them have approached him, or even spoken to him, since he stopped going to school. It's like they think that he's contagious, somehow – that if they approach him, they too will be saddled with a kid, their futures ruined.

People's reactions hurt less now, when he's gotten his priorities in order. Before, he was worrying about how he would manage – how he'd be able to take care of a kid while everything seemed to work against him. He was trying to work a baby into the plans he had already made, and got scared and frustrated when it wouldn't work. Now, Sam comes first. Always. Everything else is on the backburner, way further down on his list of priorities.

It's freeing, in a way, to see things so clear.

Sam is his *son*. Billy didn't plan for him, and he may not be the best equipped to take care of him. But Sam is *his*. And he'll be damned if he doesn't do everything in his power to make sure that Sam grows up okay.

Sometimes, he wonders if Neil ever felt that way about him. If he ever got the same overwhelmed feeling when he looked at Billy, as Billy gets when he looks at Sam. But then he remembers Neil's cold eyes and harsh words, and thinks *probably not*. It hurts, but there's nothing Billy can do about it. He has always been wrong, somehow, in the eyes of his father.

He's going to make sure that Sam never feels that way.

In the early evenings, after work and errands and an early dinner, Billy will sit with Sam on the bed, and play with him. He puts on music on the little radio, and lets it drone on in the background, and then he will pick Sam up and bounce him on his leg, or hold him in front of his face and bury his face in his soft tummy, or kiss his chubby little cheeks. He doesn't care what people would say if they saw him – big bad Billy Hargrove playing with a baby? It would have been unthinkable back in school – because there's no one there to see them.

Every time Sam smiles – because he *does*, he smiles now – Billy melts. He can't resist those smiles. Because at least *someone* is happy to see him.

Frank is proving to have a weakness for Sam's smiles, too. On several occasions, Billy has walked in on Frank crouched in front of Sam's baby nest in the back room, speaking gibberish in a high voice, and

grinning down at the baby. He never touches him – because Billy hasn't said he can, yet, and it's quite obvious that Frank is trying not to push when it comes to Billy and his son – but when Billy clears his throat, Frank will stand up and rub awkwardly at the back of his neck, face a shade darker than normal.

The third time it happens, Billy makes a decision. He picks Sam up and promptly holds him out for Frank to hold. Frank freezes. It'd be funny, if Billy wasn't feeling so unreasonably nervous about it.

“Really?” is what Frank says, as if he knows how hard this is.

Instead of answering, Billy shoves Sam into his arms, and gets to watch Frank's hesitant expression melt away in favor of absolute delight.

“Well hello there, little man,” he coos, and bounces Sam a little, grinning wide when he doesn't cry. “Are you gonna abandon your daddy and come hang out with me out in the store today, and charm the pants off all the customers? Yes. Yes you are.” He gives Billy a look as if to say ‘don't worry, I don't mean it’ before turning his attention back to the baby.

It makes Billy feel some sort of way, watching someone else hold his son. It suddenly dawns on him that this is only the second time that he sees someone else holding Sam – the first one being Susan, during those first days when Billy had no idea what he was doing. But here's Frank, baby talking with Sam with a big grin on his face, and it makes Billy smile, too. And if Frank happens to look up and catch him smiling, he doesn't say anything.

He mentions this to Frank, later; that he was one of the first people to hold Sam. Frank looks pleased at that, but then he asks if Billy wouldn't even let the doctor hold his baby, and that has Billy frowning.

“What doctor?”

Frank shrugs. “Haven't you taken him to the doctor, for check-ups?”

Billy hasn't, and he says so. In Neil's house, the only time you went to

the doctor was if there was blood or broken bones – and sometimes, not even then. But Frank tells him that it's usual to bring babies in for check-ups, to make sure they're growing properly.

“You should probably do that with your little guy, here,” he says. “Considering he lives only on formula. Dolly tells me –,” Dolly being his wife, “– that a baby usually needs the milk from his or her mother. Makes them grow strong, or something.” He must see something on Billy's face, then, because he hurries to add, “I'm sure you're doing great, kid, and Samuel looks like a happy and healthy baby. But it never hurts to double-check.”

Billy books an appointment the same day, but has to wait three days to bring Sam in for his check-up. It gives him just enough time to pick up some books from the library and learn exactly what can go wrong when babies aren't given the proper nutrients, so by the time the day of the appointment rolls around, he's convinced that he has managed to fail Sam somehow without even realizing it.

It's a huge relief to hear that all things considered, Sam is doing good. The pediatrician who meets with them looks Billy in the eye when she says it, as if she's trying to drive a point home, and somehow makes it sound as if *Billy's* the one doing good. For some reason, it makes his face heat up.

Sam gets a clean bill of health, and Billy goes home with a little bottle of some kind of drops that will apparently help Sam build up his immune system faster, what with him only eating formula.

Billy drives past the diner on his way home and buys a piece of pecan pie to go, to celebrate. (Doris gives him a discount, and slips him a cigarette too.)

It's good to know that at least two people in this town (Frank, and now the pediatrician) seems to think that Billy's doing an okay job at taking care of a baby at his age. But it does make him think, because he wants to do *more* than an okay job. Keeping Sam happy and

healthy is the goal here, albeit a new one, and while the caravan is okay to live in for now – although way too small, really – it won't do when summer ends, and it starts to get colder. It will definitely be too cold, too small, too *unsafe* in the winter.

So. He needs to find a better place to live. Somewhere with electricity, heating, and a door he can lock.

Money is tight. Now, Frank is paying him a fair salary, and even after paying for food and formula and diapers and what-not, he can easily put money away after each paycheck. But as far as saving up for a place to live, over a single summer, it doesn't go very far.

Billy doesn't mention this to Frank. But he does take the man up on his offer to bring some of the unsold bread home at the end of the day. Billy buys the cheapest butter and the cheapest cheese, and basically lives off sandwiches. It's fast, it's easy, it's cheap. It doesn't exactly help him build muscle, but it'll have to do, for now.

He wonders if he's going to have to get a second job, somehow. But some things haven't changed in the month he's been working for Frank; people still look down on him for ending up in this situation in the first place, and he'd still have to bring Sam with him to whatever job he got. Besides, the working hours at The Bakery demand that he goes to bed early, eight am at the very latest. And Sam demands all of his attention in between work and sleep. He simply doesn't have the time, or the means, or – if he's being honest – the energy.

Then something happens that ... well. Changes things, but again; not really.

6. Billy and Gus (and Chris)

Notes for the Chapter:

Double update today; the next chapter's an interlude, so you get that as a bonus!

(Also, this chapter is where the prostitution tag comes into play, if you'd prefer to be warned of such things.)

One day, when he's delivering cookies and buns to the café in the new mall – rumor has it that they're trying to be this fancy, modern place, although not fancy enough to do their own baking obviously – there's a new guy waiting at the loading dock at the back of the building. He's already there when Billy drives up, leaning against the wall next to the door, smoking a cigarette and looking at his watch. Billy hasn't slept well, and Sam soiled his diaper just as Billy had changed him before going out the door, so he had to stop at the side of the road and change him again. In short, Billy's cranky and behind schedule, and does not appreciate this guy's passive-aggressive glances at his watch.

He yanks open the van, perhaps scowling a bit more than strictly necessary, and brings out the crates and carries them over to the loading dock where the guy is waiting. He feels the guy's eyes on him as he goes back to pick up the last crate, but has no time to think about it because Sam starts crying in the passenger seat and Billy wants to scream. This day is not going according to plan.

When Billy's about to slam the last crate down, the guy actually crouches down and takes it from him. His fingers brush over Billy's, and when Billy's eyes snap up to meet his, he doesn't look away. Instead he smiles. And Billy's so thrown off by this that he doesn't realize for several seconds that he hasn't let go of the crate, and the guy is still touching him.

When he *does* realize, he pulls his hands back, as if burned, and stumbles back.

The guy laughs. He's got a nice laugh, it sounds friendly enough. He's in his thirties, maybe a little younger, and he looks ... normal. Plain, even. But Billy's reaction apparently amuses him, because he lets go of the crate and holds his hands up in fake surrender.

"Relax," he says. "I don't bite." Billy just swallows, at a loss for words, and the guy's smile turns into a smirk as he continues, "Unless you want me to. What are you doing later?"

And that's such a *bad line*, such a *blatant come-on*, that for a second Billy can't wrap his head around it. When the penny drops – that the guy is actually *coming onto him*, or worse, messing with him – he feels his face go red, and he lets the embarrassment of it transform into anger.

If it had happened before he learned about Sam, Billy might have decked the guy; jumped up on the loading dock only to knock the guy's teeth out. But now, when Billy's tired and grumpy and *a dad*, with all of Hawkins judging him for everything he does, it seems like too much of a hassle – and also, he's still too stunned at the audacity of this guy.

So what he does, is turn on his heel and walk back to the van, throwing a "You can't afford me" over his shoulder as he does, almost like an afterthought. He hears the guy laugh, surprised and amused, and pointedly doesn't look back as he gets in the car and drives off.

Sam is still crying, and normally Billy would take care of him first, but he needs to put some distance between him and that guy. His heart is beating too fast, his hands are clenched around the steering wheel. He can't believe that that happened to him – in *Hawkins*, of all places.

He'd always found himself looking at boys, rather than girls, but he's also learned early on that that wasn't normal. Wasn't something that you admitted out loud, or even acknowledged even existed.

He'd allowed himself to look at some of the boys in town – because some of them were actually worth looking at – but he never did anything but look. Partly because of the risk – because this was bumfuck, Indiana, and they probably buried fags six feet under just

for an insinuation – and partly because, well. There hasn't been anyone with whom he'd want to go any further, even if by some miracle the opportunity arose. And besides, he's got too much going on. Proven by the crying baby beside him, the sound of which is a perfect backdrop to his jumbled thoughts.

While driving, he convinces himself that the guy must have been pulling his leg. Making a joke or something, because what else could it have been? An *actual* come-on? No. Not here.

He just hopes that his own retort came off as replying in kind.

The next time he drives up to the mall, he's irrationally nervous. He knows he shouldn't be, he's just doing his job, but that doesn't stop his stomach from turning on itself when he sees the same guy on the loading dock, waiting for him.

This time, the guy comes down to meet him, under the guise of helping. When Billy opens the van and starts unloading it, the guy grabs a crate too. He doesn't say anything, which makes Billy relax, if only a fraction. When they're done, Billy walks around to the driver's seat and is about to get in, when the guy calls out for him.

"Hey, man. Just out of curiosity, how much?"

Billy stops with his hand on the door, and frowns. "What?"

"Just wondering if I could afford you."

And this is just ... not happening. Billy had just managed to convince himself that it had been a joke. "What?" he repeats.

"Twenty bucks enough?" the guy says, shrugging, obviously not seeing anything wrong with propositioning a random dude behind a mall. "For a blowjob."

Billy finds himself gaping, like a goldfish. He doesn't know what to say. He knows what he *should* say, obviously, but he's so baffled by the *nerve* of the guy, that he –

“Rumor has it that you’re strapped for cash,” the guy continues, and if he was standing closer Billy really *would* deck him for that – the money is a sore topic – and then he offers up a smile that almost look shy and doesn’t at all correlate with the audacity of the question. “Just think about it, yeah?”

And Billy does. Think about it, that is.

He thinks about it when Frank gives him his salary in an envelope, and he carefully counts out what he hopes he can save. He thinks about it when he tells Frank that maybe he wants help to start a bank account after all. He thinks about it when he cuts out coupons before going to the store, and realizes that it’s become a normal thing to do.

He thinks about it that night, when he stays awake long after he should have gone to bed; a sleeping Sam next to him and the “For rent” section of the newspaper open in front of him.

It’s not a lot, twenty bucks. But it’s twenty bucks that Billy could use.

So yeah. He thinks about it.

He thinks about it almost constantly until the next day, a Friday, when he resolutely makes himself *not* think about it as he drives up to the loading dock behind the mall; the last stop on his delivery run. The guy is there, and offers a nod and a smile even before Billy has gotten out of the car. Sam is asleep in the baby carrier in the front seat, chubby cheeks tinted pink in sleep. Billy almost wishes he’d wake up, so Billy would have a reason not to face the guy.

But Sam sleeps on, and maybe that’s a sign? Billy gets out of the van. Before he can open the back doors to get to the crates, though, the guy walks up to him and asks, “Did you think about it?” He stops a couple of respectful steps away, and he almost looks nervous – *almost*. Strangely, that is what cements it for Billy.

“Yeah,” he bites out.

“And?”

“Thirty,” Billy says, raising his chin, letting fate decide. If the guy says yes, it’s thirty bucks. If he says no, Billy won’t have to think about this anymore.

The guy looks at him, considering. And then he reaches in the back of his jeans to bring out his wallet, from where he picks out two ten dollar bills and two fives. He holds them out with a neutral expression, and Billy hesitates.

If he takes them, it would be the confirmation needed for the guy to punch him in the nose for being a fag, if that’s what he’s after. The guy could tell everyone in town, and Neil wouldn’t be the only one gunning for Billy, then. Or the other scenario, not any less daunting; Billy takes the money, and has to suck the guy’s dick. Something he’s never done before.

He could say no. Slap the guy’s hand away and laugh in his face, play it off as a joke. Or maybe fall back on anger – shove the guy away, pretend to be offended, threaten to tell people.

But. The guy is squirming, looking a little uncomfortable now and ... It’s thirty dollars.

He takes the money. Stuffs them down his pocket without looking, while ignoring the way the guy’s face splits in a grin. He half-expects a fist to the face. But the guy doesn’t punch him.

Scenario number two it is, then.

Billy’s sweating. It’s not even that warm out, today. “So, uh ...” He doesn’t know where to go from here. Luckily, the man doesn’t let him flounder for long.

“If you drive around the side of the building, you can park out of sight,” he says, as if he’s planned ahead. He probably has. “There’s an alley between two buildings there, no doors or windows. Meet me behind the dumpsters.”

Billy wants to balk at this, wants to say that he’s changed his mind, wants to drive away and not look back. But as he gets in the front seat of the van, he looks over to Sam, still sleeping soundly with

Frank's purple dolphin next to him. Sam is covered by the same blanket that he had when he was brought to Billy's doorstep. Billy goes to the laundromat two times a week because he hasn't got enough clothes for him to last any longer. They're in the middle of summer already, and Billy is no closer to finding an affordable place for them to stay.

Sam twitches a little in his sleep, hands clenching on air while his tiny lips presses together for a moment before relaxing again, and Billy can't help smiling. He told himself he'd do whatever it takes to make sure Sam was safe and happy. What's a little dick-sucking in the great scheme of things? Billy *has* been thinking about doing it before – on many occasions, even. So what if it was all theoretical? Besides, it's not like the guy is ugly.

So Billy starts the van and drives around the building. He parks where no one will see him, checks to make sure that Sam is still sleeping, and rolls down the window so he'll hear if Sam wakes up. A minute later, the guy saunters around the corner, checking over his shoulder to make sure no one is watching, before leading Billy into the alley.

And there, behind a couple of green dumpsters – where no one will spot them unless they walk straight past the trash – Billy gets on his knees for a man for the first time. The ground is not as grimy as Billy would have thought it'd be, but then again, the mall just opened.

It's ... weird. Not like he imagined it at all, but also not as terrible as he'd feared. In the end, it's easy money, because the guy does most of the work and all Billy has to do is keep his balance and concentrate on not gagging. He's only mildly successful, but it doesn't matter because it doesn't go on for very long.

The guy comes, Billy spits, and then they both pause while they get their breaths.

"Thanks," the guy says and tucks himself back in his pants. He zips up, fixes his shirt, and reaches out a hand to help Billy up.

Billy has no idea what the protocol is in a situation like this, and feels out of his depth; almost more right now than a couple of minutes

ago. But he lets the man help him to his feet, and brushes dirt off the knees of his jeans. “Uh, no problem,” he says, a little awkwardly.

Luckily, the guy is equally unsmooth about it, and pats Billy on the arm before clearing his throat and murmuring that he should get back to work. That reminds Billy that he still has to deliver the bread, and he gets back in the van and drives it back to the loading dock, and the guy helps him unloading the crates, and none of them say a word to each other until Billy gets back in the driver’s seat, and the guy gives a dorky little wave and goes, “See you later, man.”

When he drives out of the mall parking lot, Billy checks his watch. The whole thing took less than fifteen minutes. That’s about what he makes in a day, otherwise. And all he had to do was suck a dick – which, okay, this probably counts as a crappy first time, but it’s not like it was *bad*. It just wasn’t good. It just ... *was*. And now he’s thirty dollars richer.

He decides not to dwell on it, because honestly he hasn’t got the energy to waste. For some reason, though, he can’t look Frank in the eye when he gets back. And he excuses himself and Sam without staying around to chat a bit, like he usually does.

It happens again. Not immediately; for almost a week he has to knock on the door by the loading dock until someone opens it and picks up the bread. But then on Thursday the following week, the guy is there again, already waiting when Billy drives up. And when he raises his eyebrows in question and surreptitiously brings out a couple of bills that he apparently prepared ahead of time – just bringing them up from his pocket, this time – Billy shrugs, and drives past the loading dock to park in the same space as last time. It’s easy money.

It’s also easier to do, this time.

And then it keeps happening. Not every day, but once or sometimes twice a week.

And then one day the guy – whose name is Gus, apparently – tells him that he’s got this friend who would also, maybe, theoretically, be

interested in the services Billy can provide. And Billy and Gus aren't *friends* or anything, but they exchange pleasantries now in addition to the money and sexual favors, and he's not half bad. He never asks about Sam, and if Sam is awake or fussy when Billy drives up, he never initiates anything. He seems like a decent enough guy that Billy trusts him with this.

So he asks Gus to point the other guy out. And the other guy – Chris – works at the mall too, and he's blonde and tan and fit – and most importantly, willing to pay the same amount Gus is. Gus sends his friend out “to pick up the bread” once or twice a week, even though they don't work in the same place – and just like that, Billy's got regulars.

On the one hand, it's weird. It wasn't like Billy was saving himself for marriage or anything, but he didn't think he would suck dick for money before he got to suck dick for fun. On the other hand, he doesn't feel any particular way about it, and it means a lot of money for little work.

If Billy thinks about it – *really* thinks about it – he can hear Neil's voice in his head, calling him the same names that he used to call Billy when he was still living in the house. It's been easier to ignore the voice since he moved out, but he still doesn't like thinking about it. Because when he does, for some reason he starts to imagine the same words, but in *Frank's* voice, and those thoughts make him feel prickly.

It's just easier to not think about it.

A lot of things are easier now, actually. He and Sam settle down somewhat in their routines, which means that Billy gets to sleep for several uninterrupted hours per night, and Frank is there to help him whenever Billy will allow it. Frank *does* help Billy set up a bank account, and if he wonders about Billy asking to have all of his paycheck put into his account instead of paid out in cash, he doesn't ask about it. Frank's wife Dolly somehow finds out that Billy's been living on – in her words – “bread and water,” and now makes Frank bring him home-cooked leftovers on the regular.

She also stops by the bakery from time to time to check up on all of

them, and coo over Samuel. When she gets to hold him, she bounces him a little and make a game out of getting him to smile, and will spend hours in the back room with him, if given half a chance. She has never once failed to draw a smile out of Sam, even when he's been screaming himself hoarse.

Billy doesn't want to admit it, but it's nice to have some help.

Both Frank and Dolly has invited him over to their house on several occasions, but Billy has so far politely turned them down. He doesn't really know why. Perhaps it's because he still lives in a caravan, and doesn't want to be reminded of how it would be to live somewhere that doesn't have wheels. Perhaps it's because Frank is his boss. And perhaps it's because the both of them make him feel so effortlessly *welcome*, and he doesn't want to risk wearing them out.

In the fall, just as the schools start up again, he sells the caravan. He never did learn what Neil paid for it, but if he paid more than what Billy gets for it, he was robbed. The caravan is trash, really, but in a weird way, Billy is sad to see it go. It was, at least for the summer, his home.

Neil technically paid for it, but Billy doesn't think anymore that he'll come knocking to get his money back. He's probably just happy that Billy is out of the picture. Billy hasn't seen his father since the day he left Cherry Lane.

With the money he's saved up, along with what he gets from the sale of the caravan, he pays the deposit and the first month's rent for a shitty little apartment two blocks from The Bakery. It's on the top floor with narrow stairs, and Billy is strangely happy that he hasn't got a lot of furniture to carry up there. The apartment has a kitchen and a living room and a tiny bedroom that is more like an alcove with a door, or maybe a large closet. The ceiling is too low and there are stains on the wallpaper and the bathroom looks like it hasn't been cleaned since they built the building and the counters in the kitchen are too low by at least three inches ... But the apartment has *heating*, and the bathroom has a *shower*, and there's running water and lamps that work and a door that locks.

Billy couldn't be happier.

The first thing he does when he gets the key is bring the baby carrier into the empty living room. He puts it on the floor in the middle of the room and picks Sam up, and spends the next twenty minutes just ... going around the apartment, pointing things out.

"This is our sink. Our taps. We'll have water on hand at any time now."

And, "This is our stove. I'll be able to cook food whenever we want it, now – *warm* food! Your favorite."

And, "This is our shower." Samuel coos in agreement at that as if he's agreeing, which makes Billy smile. "It's my third favorite thing in the world right now."

The second, being his Camaro.

The first, by a mile; his son.

He moves all his stuff – everything that's been crammed into the caravan and the Camaro both – into the apartment, and it sits by the door in boxes and crates, and doesn't take up much space at all. He and Sam spends the first night in their new apartment on the floor, on the thin mattress that Billy brought with him from the caravan (he figured that the new owners would replace it anyway). It's uncomfortable, but Billy can stretch out and doesn't bump his toes into a cupboard, so it's worth it.

The next day after work, he asks Frank if he can borrow the van, and when Frank agrees he drives it to the junkyard – leaving Sam with Dolly at The Bakery, which is unprecedented and probably shocks both her and Frank, although they're wise enough not to comment on it – and spends an hour climbing around, looking for useful things. He finds a stool which is surprisingly sturdy but with peeling paint, and brings a couple of cinderblocks and a slightly water-damaged board made out of plywood which he figures will work nicely as a table, before he can get real furniture.

He picks up some other stuff as well, that might be useful, and he's

glad that the junk yard is a ten minute drive from town. It's not that he's ashamed that he's foraging for scraps or anything – because some of the things he finds are in surprisingly good condition and he's amazed that anyone would throw them out – but he doesn't want people to get any more reason to look at him with pity, or judgement. He's doing his best, and right now that includes furnishing his apartment with free stuff that no one will miss.

Besides, he never cared for decoration. Susan insisted on putting some curtains up in his room back at Cherry, and he didn't even care enough to take them down.

Just before he's about to call it a day, he sees an old bedframe standing on its side, and happily puts that in the back of the van, too. It's lacquered pine, and someone has drawn all over it with blue marker, but Billy doesn't give a shit. If it can keep him and Sam above the drafty floor, he doesn't care what it looks like.

He brings all of his finds home, and somehow manages to lug all of it up the narrow stairs by himself before taking a breather and chugging some tap water, muscles sore from exertion. It reminds him that he hasn't really been working out since the spring, and while baking is harder work than he thought it would be and is almost like a work-out session, he misses lifting weights. He resolves to pick it up again at some point – if he can find the time. He still has his weights, but he had to leave his bench behind, as it wouldn't fit in the caravan when he moved out.

By the time he returns to The Bakery to pick up Sam and return the keys to the van, he finds Dolly sitting on a chair with Sam on her lap in front of the counter, with two other ladies standing near her, positively entranced by Sam's chubby cheeks and flailing arms.

Frank sighs at him from behind the counter. "About time you got back. I was about to send out a search party."

Billy falters. "I ... Sorry, I had to pick up some stuff ..."

Frank waves his words away. "Don't worry about it, kid, I didn't mean it like that." He points with his thumb to the ladies in the corner. "But your boy there has been charming the pants off every

customer who comes in here. No one's buying any bread without spending at least ten minutes staring at the baby first."

"And rightly so!" Dolly pipes up from her corner. One of the ladies laughs in agreement, and the other one saunters up to the counter to get her bread bag, which has indeed been packaged up for her already.

They leave, but not without waving at Sam and Dolly, who takes Sam's arm in her hand and waves it back at them. He makes a little sound at that, and Billy suddenly has to come and hold him. It's been several hours. He needs to hold his baby.

Dolly laughs and pats him on the shoulder when she hands Sam over, as if she understands, and when he tries to thank her for watching Sam for him, she won't hear it.

"He's an absolute delight, and I'd gladly watch him whenever. He makes me miss my grandchildren – which reminds me!" She puts her palms together in preparation to ask something. "Do you think you could, possibly, close up the Bakery on Friday? Frank and I are going to Chicago to visit Hannah and the girls this weekend, and it'd be nice to get an early start to get ahead of traffic ..."

"Of course." The words are out of Billy's mouth before she finishes. "I'll do that, no problem."

She smiles at him and throws an arm around him in something like a hug, which he can't reciprocate or get out of since he's holding Sam. "Thank you, you're a good boy. Young man. I'm so glad you came to work for Frank."

And there must be something lodged in Billy's throat, because he can't speak, suddenly. He blinks, and nods, and gently extricates himself from her arms. He smiles at her, nods at Frank, says goodbye to them both before he puts Sam in the baby carrier and walks out the door.

His mind is blank on the way to the apartment, and it's not until he's closed and locked the door behind him that he allows his tears to fall.

He can still feel her arm around him. She *hugged* him. He can't remember the last time he got hugged. It makes him feel ... It makes him feel *something*. Like maybe he shouldn't have missed it as much as he obviously did.

Sam fell asleep on the way home, like he usually does when he's being carried or when he's in a moving car. Now, Billy gently picks him up and places him against his own chest, Sam's little hand over his shoulder and his head in the crook of Billy's neck. Billy puts his hand – the one not supporting his butt – on the back of Sam's head, and closes his eyes. Breathes him in.

Hugs him.

Because Sam is the best thing Billy has ever done, and he'll be damned if Sam grows up without hugs. He'll hug his son *every day*, for the rest of his life.

Notes for the Chapter:

I have no idea how people priced a blowjob back then. If thirty dollars is too cheap, imagine that Billy didn't know what to charge and figured it was enough. If it's too much, imagine that Gus and his friend doesn't really have a lot of options, and are willing to pay. There we go, problem solved!

7. Mattress interlude with Billy and Frank

Notes for the Chapter:

Bonus update today; mattress interlude!

Sam is not, generally, a fussy baby. He'll cry at times and sometimes for a long time, sure, but not every day – most of the time he's happy and content. He sleeps often, but not for very long, and Billy *loves* him. Loves to watch him try to roll over, loves to watch him discover things (the day he sees Sam inspect his own hand, Billy doesn't even get to the store before it closes because he's so enthralled), loves to make him smile that chubby baby smile that melts Billy's heart from the inside and leaves him helpless – leaves him smiling like a loon, too.

Sam takes up all of his time. He goes to work, he occasionally does his *other* work, he goes home, he cooks and he eats and he sleeps – rinse and repeat – but Sam is always with him, and Sam always comes first.

It's not exactly the life Billy had imagined he would have at eighteen, or *ever*, but he finds that he doesn't mind it.

In fact, even with the way money is always tight and the way he's always tired and how most of his belongings are second-hand, he wouldn't change it for the world.

Because he's got a *purpose*, now. Sam is the reason for everything he does, nowadays. Billy never feels as grounded as when he's fed Sam in the evenings, and is lounging in his bed, with Sam sleeping on his chest. Sometimes, Billy will read a book while lying like that and rubbing Sam's back with one hand, but more often than not he finds himself just watching Sam sleep. He never gets tired of that; can lie like that for hours.

Summer turns into fall, the air gets colder, and Billy puts rolled-up towels in the windows of their apartment to stop the draft. He's so glad he's got this place. It's a shithole, but it's *their* shithole, and while the radiators make a weird clunking noise when they're on, at

least they have heating. The caravan would *not* have been sufficient the fall.

Two weeks after moving in, Billy has finally gotten everything in order enough to let Frank come and inspect the place. He's acquired a couch that someone had left by the side of the road next to some trash cans – he paid the owner of the house ten dollars to help him carry it home and up the stairs – and his cupboards are filled with various mismatching plates and cups and cutlery, bought for cheap at a yard sale.

He brings out the best of everything he's got when he makes coffee for Frank (in a pot on the stove) while Frank is holding Sam and walking around the apartment, inspecting everything.

"It looks good," Frank says, and Billy fights the urge to smile proudly. But then Frank stops in the doorway of Billy's tiny bedroom and Billy can *hear* the frown on his face as he says: "Is this where you sleep?"

"Uh. Yeah?" Because he would think that the bed kind of gave that away.

"Kid," Frank says, and he sounds disappointed. "This is not a mattress."

Billy pulls the pot of coffee to the side, turns the stove off and walks out in the living room to see what he's talking about. He finds Frank bent over his bed, poking at the bedding with a skeptical look on his face. When he sees Billy, he stands up straight and adjusts his grip on Sam. "This is a rug, at most."

"What?" Billy says, because he's not following.

"I'm buying you a mattress."

"What?" Billy says again. "No!"

"A *real* one," Frank continues and glares at Billy's bed as if it personally offended him. "You can't sleep on this thing."

"I can!" Billy says, and then, "I have. I mean, I am."

“No wonder you look like you’re about to keel over at any given time, then.”

Despite working for Frank for months now, Billy has only recently gotten to the point of daring to engage in banter with the man. “Hey, that’s just rude. Insulting a guy in his own home like that.”

“Kid, the bags under your eyes on any given day look softer than that mattress you’ve got. Are you getting enough sleep?”

“Uh, not really, no,” Billy says, raising his eyebrows and directing a pointed look at Sam in Frank’s arms. “Because I’ve got a baby?”

Frank looks at him as if he just made Frank’s point for him. “Yeah, exactly! And do you want him to sleep on something that might as well be the floor, for how hard it is?”

Billy decides against telling him that they *have* slept on the floor before, and instead juts his chin out and says, “He sleeps on a pillow and folded up blankets.” Because it stings, just a little, that Frank would think he’d deprive Sam of a good place to sleep.

Frank’s eyes soften. “Of course he does.” He hands Sam over to Billy with a “He needs a diaper change by the way,” and when Billy takes his son, Frank claps him on the arm. “You’ve done good work here, kid. I’m proud of you.”

Perhaps sensing the way Billy tenses at those words, he then turns and walks into the kitchen to start bringing out cups for the coffee, letting Billy school his expression back to normal while taking care of Sam’s diaper change in the bathroom.

“I’m still buying you a mattress,” he says, from the kitchen, and Billy rolls his eyes.

“No you’re not. I don’t need one.”

“Oh, you *definitely* need one. And it’s not up for negotiation. Consider it a moving in present. It’s rude to reject a moving in present.”

Billy laughs softly and lets Sam grab onto his finger, and moves it so that Sam’s arm moves up and down. It makes Sam smile. Billy bends

over and kisses his tummy. “Uncle Frank is crazy, huh.” Because Frank has been referring himself as ‘Uncle Frank’ to Sam for weeks, now. Billy has yet to correct him. “Yes he is. So crazy.”

Sam doesn’t disagree, and Billy gives him another kiss. Out loud, so that Frank will hear him in the kitchen, he says, “Well, wouldn’t wanna be rude.”

“Good,” Frank says from two steps behind him, startling Billy into whirling around. Frank’s standing in the doorway, holding two cups of coffee. “Drink your coffee. We have a lot to do today.”

“Wh—?”

“We’re going mattress shopping.”

And they do. They come back later that evening with not only a brand new mattress – which is slightly too wide for the bed frame – but also new sheets, a pillow for the couch, and two new blankets; one for Billy and one for Sam. When Billy tries to insist on paying for the other stuff, Frank refuses.

“No way. Dolly would kill me. You’re lucky she wasn’t here for this, honestly. She’d have bought you curtains and decorative pillows and *doilies*, probably.”

“The *fuck* is a doily?”

“Just, be glad that you don’t know.”

8. Billy and Harrington

Notes for the Chapter:

Two things:

1. Alternative title for this chapter is "Billy makes a series of not very good impressions (without meaning to)"
2. I admire authors who can keep their chapters about the same length. I am not one of those authors. This one got long.

Things are going ... *well*. Or as well as things can go, for a teenage single father in Hawkins, Indiana. Things are going so well, in fact, that Billy is no longer dreaming about going back to California on a daily basis. How could he? He has a job here, and a place to live, and people who are willing to help if he needs it. Leaving for something basically unknown would just be irresponsible – and Billy's trying to be responsible, these days. For Samuel's sake.

And then, one day, something happens that threatens everything Billy has built up since May.

He's still sucking dick for money behind the mall, since neither Gus nor Chris have indicated that Billy's services are no longer needed. Billy figures that they either don't know what to do with their money, or Billy is the only choice the two of them have to get off with another guy in Hawkins, who isn't their friend.

(Hooking up with a friend may not be the smartest thing to do, after all. Billy knows this from his experience with Lisa. And besides, Gus and Chris *could* be hooking up with each other too, for all that Billy knows. He just doesn't care, not as long as they want to throw their money at him.)

Their little arrangement is something that works for all three of them, so why stop? Billy doesn't know what kind of job the two of them are doing in the mall, but whatever it is, it obviously pays well enough for them to have money to spend on blowjobs, which is ultimately the only thing Billy cares about.

They have a good thing going. Until something comes along that fucks it up.

Or rather, *someone*.

So far, the space behind the dumpsters has been safe. No one throws their trash away until the end of the day, just after closing, anyway – and even if they did, they'd have to pass both the van *and* the dumpsters to even see Billy and his ... well, his client.

Too bad that on this day, someone decides to do just that.

Billy is just getting started on Chris – and he's gotten better at what he's doing, so by now he's actively participating and everything; almost having some fun with it sometimes – when there's a metallic clang that makes the both of them jump (and honestly Chris was *lucky* that Billy hadn't gotten his mouth on him yet, or it could have ended badly for him). When they look up, *Steve fucking Harrington* is standing there, having obviously just thrown something into the dumpster, and staring at them like a deer in headlights.

Billy thinks, somewhat hysterically, that there's probably a similar look on his own face.

"Uh," Harrington says, and doesn't seem to have a plan for any additional words. It's enough to get Chris moving though; he swears, pushes Billy away from him, tucks himself back in his pants and zips up in record time, and then shoulders past Harrington while trying to hide his face.

Wow. What a guy.

During those few seconds when Chris escapes, Harrington's eyes don't leave Billy, and Billy is frozen. He's on his knees on the asphalt, having just had his hands on another man's dick. There's no way Harrington didn't see that. There's no way he doesn't know *exactly* what was going on here.

Billy's mind is whirling. Someone *saw them*. Someone *knows*. Not just anyone – but *Steve Harrington*, whom Billy beat into unconsciousness less than a year ago and then never spoke to again.

Shit.

Shit shit *shit*.

He gets to his feet, and doesn't miss how Harrington takes a cautious step back. It makes him pause. And for a couple of seconds that feel like an eternity, they just stand there, staring at each other. Harrington is wearing some kind of costume, like a sailor or something. Billy would probably laugh if the situation was any different; as it is, he feels very far from laughing. Might never laugh again, ever.

Harrington's face is red, and his eyes are still too wide. He hasn't blinked yet.

Billy's eyes are wide, too, but he imagines that as a contrast to Harrington's blush, he himself must be pale as a sheet. Because Harrington *saw*, Harrington *knows*, Harrington can *tell on him*. Everyone will find out about him, and they'll hurt him and they'll *take Sam away from him* –

The panic fills him up until he's close to bursting. But he doesn't speak. None of them do. One of them is going to have to say something soon, or Billy's going to break. He's just opened his mouth to speak – not having a single idea about what will come out of his mouth – when there's a wail coming from the van behind Harrington.

It's Sam. Sam's awake. And Sam comes before everything else – even this.

Billy swallows, and breaks eye contact. He walks past Harrington, making sure to keep as far away from him as he can and keep his head down. He gets to where the van is parked, opens the door to the passenger seat and checks on Sam. He can be a little cranky when he's just woken up, especially if Billy's not there with him, so Billy picks him up and bounces him gently up and down to calm him down. He can feel Harrington's eyes bore into the back of his neck, but he refuses to turn around. He can't deal with that, not now, can't look Harrington in the eye again before he knows what he's going to say.

“Shhh,” he says to Sam, soothing him. “Hey, it’s okay. It’s okay.”

But it isn’t. It’s not okay. He still doesn’t know what to say but he has to say *something*. He steels himself against whatever hateful look will be on Harrington’s face and licks his lips, prepares to try to explain, or *beg* – and keeps Sam in his arms as if he’s a shield that will protect Billy against Harrington somehow (‘like a coward’ says a voice in his head that sounds like Neil). He finally makes himself turn around.

And Harrington is gone.

The next couple of days are excruciating. Billy goes about his usual routine, but he’s terrified the whole time. He keeps expecting someone to say something, to show that they *know* about him. He hasn’t really considered until now what people in a small town would do to guys who are into other guys – when he first came to town he was too angry and then when Sam came along he was too busy to really think about it – but now the thought won’t leave him alone. At every turn, he expects someone to pull him into an alley and beat him to a pulp, perhaps not stopping until he’s dead. He’s heard about it happening before, in California. And this is a small town, with narrow-minded people. Billy doing gay things here could very well get him killed.

And what would happen to Sam if that happened? If anything was to happen to Billy, Sam’s closest family would be Neil, and Billy would literally claw his way out of the grave to keep Sam out of Neil’s grasp. Not that it would be very likely, for Neil to agree to take Sam in. Billy can’t even remember if Neil even looked at Sam, when they lived in the same house, and he sure as fuck hasn’t shown any in him since they moved out. Haven’t once popped by to see how his only son and grandson are doing.

Even in the small town of Hawkins, Billy hasn’t seen his father or Susan since he moved out.

It’s kind of a remarkable feat, really, especially considering the fact that he’s spotted Max around town several times. (He hasn’t dared approach her yet, though. Just kept his head down and pretended he

didn't see her, because he doesn't know what he'd say to her either.)

Now, he's forced to consider the possibility that he may not be able to stay in Hawkins after all. He spent most of his money on the apartment, and hasn't had the time to save up a lot, since moving in. He guesses he could sell the Camaro ... maybe drive it a town or two over, where no one knows yet, and sell it there. Buy himself and Sam a bus ticket back to Cali or something.

He'd be homeless there though. No job. No car. No friends. No Frank, no Dolly.

He can't go back home, because California ... isn't home anymore. It's a startling realization.

As the days pass without anything bad happening, he's starting to think that maybe, just maybe, Harrington hasn't said anything to anyone about what he saw. Because surely, if he had, Billy would have gotten beaten up at by now at the very least?

So, Harrington obviously didn't tell on him. Billy is grateful, but at the same time it worries him. No one does anything for free, and if someone's being nice, it usually means that they'll want something in return. Billy can't think of anything that Harrington would want from him, so he lives in perpetual unease, after that day. He keeps waiting for the other shoe to drop.

It doesn't help that he doesn't see hide nor hair of Gus or Chris, after they were spotted. He can understand it, sure, but he'd gotten used to being able to put some extra cash away at the end of the week. Not having that bonus income makes him extra cautious of the way he spends his money.

Dolly had been chewing him out before for eating mostly sandwiches, so with the extra money he had felt that he could indulge her – and himself – in the occasional TV dinner or soup in a can. Frank is paying him a fair wage so technically he can afford it, still, but he doesn't feel comfortable spending too much on food when he doesn't know what the future will bring. He can't be carrying Sam around all the time – will he need a stroller? A crib? What will he do when Sam gets older – he'll have to buy a bed for him, won't he? And babies

grow fast; he'll need more clothes. Warmer clothes.

There's so many things he hasn't even considered yet, and thinking about it makes him frown to himself as he does the math in his head.

He figures, he can survive on sandwiches. He *likes* sandwiches. So he goes back to buying only the basics, and keeps to the absolute cheapest brands.

Since it's getting colder, Billy's not as likely to take walks around town with Sam anymore, even with the harness baby carrier thing. He raids the church's last flea market one Sunday for baby clothes for colder weather, and comes away with a pretty good haul – but none of the books (that he occasionally checks out from the library) say anything about cold air and babies, and he doesn't want to risk it. Besides, he's not too fond of the colder air himself either. So he walks to work and back, and to the store and back, and that's basically it.

Considering that fact, it's not really surprising that the next time he sees Harrington, it's in the store. Billy's just gotten off work, and experience has taught him that that time of the day – around eleven – is the perfect time for him to shop for groceries; he misses both the old people who are there early, and the people who go there during lunch. The store is as empty of people as it's going to be, which suits him just fine.

He's tired after his shift, and walks down the aisles with Sam strapped to his chest while squinting against the fluorescent lights overhead, yawning while he looks for the things on his list. Milk and eggs and butter and diapers and formula. He's just thrown a pack of the cheapest sliced cheese they have into his cart, when he turns a corner into the cereal aisle and almost runs Harrington over.

They both jump back – Harrington swearing and Billy trying to maneuver his cart to the side, and only when they have successfully avoided a collision do they look up and see who's there.

Harrington stares at him, just like he did weeks ago when he saw him behind the dumpsters, and Billy ... Billy freezes. They haven't seen each other since that day, and Billy *knows* that Harrington must be thinking of the last time he saw him. He can't help it; can feel himself

blushing. He desperately wishes that Sam would start crying or something, just like the last time, so he'd have a reason to leave.

But Sam doesn't cry. Oh no. Instead of crying, he kicks his chubby little legs and waves his arms around, and lets out a delighted little shriek. Billy knows *exactly* what face he must be making, and judging by how Harrington's eyes soften when he looks at Sam, not even Harrington is immune to that face.

They're standing there, with a cart and a baby between them, and none of them are saying anything. Harrington's looking between Billy and his son, and eventually he just makes a jerky little motion, like a shrug that tries too hard to be casual, and nods.

"Boy or girl?" he asks, and Billy startles at hearing his voice. He's been worrying for weeks now about what he would say when faced with Harrington again. What Harrington would say to *him*. He didn't expect ... small talk.

"Boy," he says. And then, for some reason, he offers, "His name's Sam."

"Sam," Harrington says, nodding a little. "He, uh. He's got your eyes."

"Uh," Billy says. "Thanks?" He sounds unsure, because *is it* a compliment? Or just an observation? Either way, it's kind of painfully obvious that Harrington's going out of his way to not be a jerk about things, and Billy appreciates it more than he wants to admit.

Harrington grimaces a little, dragging a hand through his hair awkwardly, and does another almost-shrug. "I'm gonna ..." He points to the dairy aisle behind Billy, and Billy finds himself nodding and pulling his cart out of the way.

"Yeah, yeah, sure."

Just as Harrington passes him, Sam windmills his arms around and lets out another bubbly shriek while smacking Billy in the face, and Billy *just* has time to see Harrington crack a smile before he passes him.

Billy gives him enough time to get out of hearing range, before breathing out an audible sigh of relief and grabbing the closest box of cereal and dashing to the checkout.

Unfortunately, it seems that Harrington had the same idea – to leave as fast as possible – because they end up in the same queue, Harrington right behind him.

Billy rolls his eyes and keeps looking straight ahead, pretending not to notice. It's easy to ignore him, because Sam's getting fussy and trying to keep him from crying is taking all of Billy's attention. He's not wholly successful, but he momentarily distracts Sam by wiggling his hand in front of his face. When it's Billy's turn to pay, he unloads his items for the cashier one-handed, since Sam has grabbed onto his thumb and is currently slobbering all over it. The cashier, a guy a couple of years older than Billy, gives him a disapproving look before rolling his eyes and snorting. Billy can feel himself tensing up, but he doesn't want to start shit. He just wants to pay for his stuff and get the hell out of here – get out of Harrington's sight, and get out from under the judgmental eyes of a guy who thinks working in a goddamn grocery store makes him better than Billy, just because Billy's got a kid.

“That'll be twenty-eight dollars, and twenty cents.”

To bring out the wallet from his back pocket, Billy has to switch hands. Sam does not appreciate being deprived of his distraction, and starts crying. Billy moves him, tries to rock him gently to soothe him, but he didn't sleep a lot today. He's a baby; he's tired, and probably hungry, and doesn't care about how the few people who are close by are watching them.

Billy does, though. He can feel Harrington's eyes on him, and fumbles with his wallet. Drops it on the floor, and has to bend down to pick it up while Sam's screaming increases in volume.

When he opens his wallet, he can feel his heart sink like stone. There are two ten dollar bills in there, nothing more. He's sure he took some money from his stash yesterday, because he knew he was going shopping after work. He took it from the jar in the cupboard, and he put it ... in the wallet? Didn't he?

He checks his pockets. *Nothing*. And during all of it, Sam continues to wail.

The cashier is watching Billy with disdain, now. As if he's somehow doing this on *purpose*.

Billy licks his lips. Doesn't dare to look behind him to see if there's a queue, since if he turns around he has to acknowledge Harrington's presence. So instead he grits his teeth and hands the cashier the twenty dollars. "Leave the cheese," he says, face burning. "And the eggs."

The cashier glares at him, and seriously, *fuck* that guy.

"Twenty-two dollars, five cents."

Fuck him with a rusty spoon.

"And the cereal," Billy grits out, low.

Too low to be heard over Sam's crying, apparently, because the cashier frowns. "What?"

Instead of repeating himself, Billy grabs the box of cereal and aggressively puts it to the side, glaring at the cashier and daring him to say anything. Thankfully, he doesn't. He takes Billy's money, finally, and Billy doesn't wait for his change (if there even is any). He hurriedly reaches for his things – the milk and butter, the diapers and the formula – when there's a hand on his shoulder, stopping him. He flinches away before he can stop himself, and whirls around.

And Harrington is standing there. Looking at him with big, dark eyes. He clears his throat, says, "Listen, I could chip in, if you n–"

"No!" Billy says, too loud and too fast. There is one other person behind Harrington in the queue, and the cashier is still glaring. Harrington, though, isn't looking annoyed. Isn't gloating. He's got a worried wrinkle between his eyebrows, and somehow that's *worse*. "No need," Billy says, between clenched teeth. Because he doesn't need anyone's pity, least of all Harrington's.

He hurriedly puts the milk, butter and formula into a too-thin plastic

bag and shoves the diapers under one arm before leaving without a backwards glance, trying hard to look like he isn't fleeing even though that's exactly what he's doing.

The walk home has never been as long as it is today. Sam cries the whole time, and people he meets keep giving him these condemning looks, like he's abusing his baby or something. It makes him quicken his steps, and by the time he's home he's almost running. Just in time, too, as the plastic bag breaks as soon as he gets through the door.

"Fuck!" Billy yells, and slams the door behind him, hard. He takes a deep breath and starts counting, slowly. Gives himself to the count of five before he sighs, picks up the groceries – thankfully, the milk didn't spill – to put them away, and loosening the baby carrier enough to be able to pick Sam up.

Sam's whole body is tense, and his face is red from screaming. He's screaming so much that he's gasping for air between every cry, and his cheeks are splotchy, and his little hands are in fists, uselessly waving at his sides.

And there's been times before when Sam wouldn't stop crying – it's happened many times – but this time Billy feels *raw*. From the embarrassment at the store, from having Harrington witness it all, from too many nights with too little sleep. He feels so raw that for a terrifying second, all he wants is to shake the baby to make him *stop crying*.

"Please shut *up*!"

Suddenly, he finds that his fingers has tightened around Sam's body, without him being aware of it. He chokes on a breath; his eyes widen and he hurriedly loosens his grip. "Shit. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Sam keeps crying, no more and no less than before, but Billy can barely hear him over his own beating heart.

He's been shaken himself by his father, countless times. That's how it started. Shakes, then shoves. Slaps. Hits. Kicks. It's not a path Billy wants to take.

"I'm sorry." His voice trembles. But Sam doesn't understand him, of course; he's just a baby. A crying baby, unhappy about something, inconsolable.

Without realizing it, Billy's started crying too. There's a burning in his eyes and his throat and he bites his lip hard so he won't make a sound. What he wants more than anything right now is to slide down the wall and have a proper breakdown in peace and quiet, but he can't. Sam comes first, and Sam is not happy. Sam is *tired*, though – apparently too tired to sleep, since Billy tried to rock him to sleep during the whole walk home without success. Now, Billy puts him against his chest and starts rocking him again, swaying gently from side to side, patting his bum while he does it. It's how he usually manages to put Sam to sleep, but this time it doesn't work. Sam keeps screaming, and it hurts Billy's ears and makes him agitated.

"Please, please, please," he finds himself chanting, while desperately starting to prepare a bottle of formula one-handed, holding Sam and rocking him with the other.

Both of them are still crying, but only one of them is loud about it.

When he finally – *finally* – gets a bottle prepared, he sinks down in the couch, holding an exhausted but still struggling Sam and trying to get him to take the bottle. When he succeeds, the relief he feels at the sudden quiet is overwhelming, and that itself makes him feel like shit. Because for a moment there, he wanted to– He was going to–

No. No, he wasn't. Billy's *never* going to lay a hand on Sam, no matter what.

"I promise, Sammy," he says, voice wavering, "I won't ever hurt you. Ever." It's a promise to himself as much as to Sam.

Sam hiccups in reply, face still red and blotchy after all that screaming. He's eating, though – one hand on Billy's chest, tiny fingers clutching at Billy's T-shirt, right over his heart. Billy imagines that he must feel his heartbeat, and tries to calm his breathing. Maybe Sam got upset because Billy was upset? And if that's the case, maybe he'll stay calm if Billy manages to stay calm?

Sam's not even halfway through the bottle when he dozes off. Billy puts the bottle on his makeshift cinderblock table, and carefully arranges himself so that he's lying down in the couch, with his feet on the armrest since he's still got his boots on. He's still wearing his jacket, too, but he's not risking waking Sam up by trying to get out of it.

He arranges Sam so that he's lying on Billy's chest, so Billy can watch him. He rubs at his back and bum, and lets Sam hold on to one of his fingers while he sleeps.

He should get started on making some kind of dinner for himself. Maybe take a quick shower, or clean up the dishes he was too tired to take care of yesterday. But Sam's finally asleep, and it's been a trying day for them both. It's not like Billy can move right now. He might as well close his eyes for a bit, too – not to sleep, it's too early to sleep, just to get some rest ...

Just for a minute ...

He startles awake later, without knowing what woke him up. Several hours must have passed, because one glance out the window tells him that it's early evening. Sam's still asleep on his chest, which isn't ideal – it'll be hell to get him to sleep later, if he has slept that long now. Billy will definitely wake up a couple of times tonight.

There's a knock on the door – *another*, as he realizes that that was the sound that woke him up in the first place – and he sits up in the couch, making sure to cradle Sam in his arms as he does it. Sam twitches a little and moves his head to the other side, unwilling to wake up yet and leaving a wet smear of drool on Billy's T-shirt.

Billy wobbles to his feet and rubs at his eyes. They feel like they're full of sand after his own bout of crying earlier, but he's too tired to care. Whoever is knocking on his door – probably a neighbor or someone who's got the wrong apartment – will just have to deal.

As soon as he opens the door, he regrets it. Because right outside his apartment, having the gall to look *surprised*, is Steve Harrington.

Billy wants to sink through the floor. He knows the picture he

probably paints; eyes puffy and red, hair mussed up from sleep, not having had a shower or a shave since yesterday and wearing wrinkly clothes with drool on them.

“Hey,” Harrington says, somewhat awkwardly. “Are you ... going somewhere?”

“What?” Billy says, before it clicks that he’s still wearing his jacket and boots, and there really is no reason to wear any of those inside his own apartment unless he just got back, or was about to leave. “No, I. No.”

Sam makes a little whine, and Billy absent-mindedly starts rocking him. That draws Harrington’s attention to the baby, and his confusion melts into a ... smile. Huh.

“Cute,” he says, and doesn’t elaborate further. Billy isn’t awake enough to deal with this yet, and just nods. Because yes, Sam *is* cute. That, at least, is an undeniable fact.

“How did you get here?” Billy asks, because he knows he’s not listed in the phone book yet – as he hasn’t got a phone. He hasn’t actually told anyone his address except for Frank (who so far has been the only visitor) and the nurses when he was at Sam’s last check-up. He doesn’t even think he’s updated his address at the library, which he really should do, considering how often he finds himself there nowadays. He makes a mental note to do that the next time he’s there.

While he’s busy going through possibilities of how Harrington found him, Harrington gives a half-hearted grin. “I have a car, you know.”

“What?”

His smile falters. “You asked how I got here. I mean, I drove, so ...”

“No, no,” Billy says, because this is such a weird situation and he’s not sure of how he’s supposed to act. “I mean, how did you find my address?” And a thought occurs to him, suddenly. “Did you even mean to come here?” Because while it would be one hell of a coincidence if Harrington managed to knock on his door by mistake

only hours after what happened at the store, it would at least be more likely than him showing up here on purpose.

“Yeah!” Steve assures him. “Why else would I ...? I mean. Sorry, I ... I went to The Bakery – you work there, right?” He doesn’t wait for a reply. “But the guy said that you’d gone home already. So I asked him where you live.”

“And he *told* you?” Billy wouldn’t have thought that Frank would just tell a random stranger where he lives – especially as Frank knows how people have been treating him in this town – and he can’t help but feel a little betrayed.

“Not right away,” Harrington says, as if he knows what Billy’s thinking. “Not until I told him that I bumped into you at the store, and even then he wanted to know what I wanted with you before he told me where you lived.”

“And what *do* you want with me?” Billy asks, because at this point he’s so confused. Sam rubs his whole face against Billy’s chest, and Billy’s shirt probably gains another drool stain. But Billy doesn’t give a shit about his appearance anymore. At this point, he couldn’t be making a worse impression if he *tried*.

“I ...” Harrington starts, and then rubs at the back of his neck awkwardly. “Look, can I come in?”

What is the normal thing to do here? A part of Billy wants to slam the door in Harrington’s face and pretend today never happened, but also – Harrington’s got dirt on him, so it’s really in Billy’s best interest to treat the guy with a modicum of civility. So he clears his throat, says “Uh, sure” like a moron, and opens the door a little wider.

Too late, he remembers that the Harringtons are one of the richest families in Hawkins, and is suddenly keenly aware of the state of his apartment. He hasn’t cleaned in probably weeks, there’s a pile of dirty clothes (mostly Sam’s) on the chair just by the door because Billy should have gone to the laundromat yesterday but figured he could to it today instead (and that obviously didn’t happen), there are unwashed dishes in the sink and half of his furniture is second-hand or from the junk yard and the other half isn’t really furniture at all.

His face burns when he takes it all in, but Harrington walks past him and looks around and politely doesn't say anything about the state of the place.

To escape the scrutiny, Billy closes the door and then walks up to the table, snatching up Sam's bottle and taking it out into the kitchen, putting it with the rest of the dishes in the sink. When he turns around, Steve has followed him in there, and he almost jumps.

The silence between them is stifling, so in desperation he takes a page out of Susan's book and blurts out, "Do you want something to drink?" and then immediately regrets it when he remembers that he doesn't actually have a lot to offer. He winces. "I have ... milk."

He closes his eyes briefly and wishes for the ground to open and swallow him up. No such luck though.

"Uh, water is fine," Harrington says, and Billy doesn't know if he should feel relieved or even more embarrassed.

This is payback, he decides. Life is kicking his ass for all his previous sins, or something. He fills up a glass – the good one, without the chipped edge – with water from the tap, and hands it to Harrington. Only then does he realize that Harrington's holding a plastic bag in one hand. Harrington seems to have forgotten about it too, if the way he falters when accepting the glass of water is any indication. In the end, he puts the bag on the counter and says, "Uh, I brought this for you."

Billy makes no move to take it, or see what's inside. Instead, he pretends that he needs both hands to hold Sam, who's still squirming in his grip, obviously not happy at having to be awake – or maybe he can just sense Billy's distress.

Oblivious to Billy's reluctance, Harrington starts picking things out from the bag. It's the items that Billy couldn't afford at the store – the cheese and the eggs and the cereal – and Billy wants to *die*. Especially when Harrington brings out a couple of chocolate bars; the kind that they keep at the check-out for people with too much money and too little impulse-control. This looks too much like charity for Billy to be able to handle.

Luckily, Sam's starting to fuss in his arms, and he can smell why.

"I gotta take care of Sam," he says, gruffly, and turns around.

"Oh," Harrington says. "Do you need help?"

"No," Billy says and risks a challenging look over his shoulder. "Diaper change." He's unreasonably pleased when Harrington blanches and takes a step back.

"I'll just ... stay here then." Harrington looks uncomfortable, but nods to himself. "Yeah."

Billy flees the scene. It annoys him that he feels the need to hide in his own apartment, but he'd rather be annoyed out of sight of Harrington than having to play nice and react to the guy bringing him goddamn groceries that he thinks that Billy's too poor to pay for.

He takes his time changing Sam's diaper, and after he's done he figures it's late enough to not have to dress him again – figures that if he can get Sam to eat again, he'll probably fall asleep again right after, if he's lucky. And then maybe sleep for a few hours before waking up and probably keep Billy up for the rest of the night.

So he gets Sam ready for bed, and then – since they're already in the bathroom – he takes the time to brush his own teeth and run a comb through his hair, and take off his jacket. Not because of Harrington or anything, just. It makes him feel a little better, is all.

When he re-enters the kitchen, Harrington is busy wiping off the counter. He's washed the dishes already, which makes Billy falter in his steps. The groceries that Harrington brought are nowhere to be seen, and Billy winces at the thought of Harrington having seen the meagre contents of his fridge and cupboards. But then he steels himself and reminds himself that he doesn't care what Harrington thinks, and that Harrington saw him getting on his knees for some guy behind a dumpster a couple of weeks ago, and probably didn't have very high expectations about Billy to begin with.

Without a word, Billy takes the newly washed saucepan and the bottle, and starts whisking together some formula, all the while

holding on to Sam with one arm. Sam, usually interested in the proceedings since he knows it means food, is preoccupied by their guest. Keeps turning his head to watch Harrington, and waves his chubby little hands around excitedly.

Billy keeps his eyes on the formula, refusing to look up – at least until Harrington’s voice comes from behind him, way too close, “Hey there, little man.” It’s followed by a chuckle that makes the hairs of Billy’s arms stand up, and he glances to the side. Harrington’s standing close to him, leaning forward and holding out a finger for Sam to grip. There’s a big smile on Harrington’s face, and for a fraction of a second Billy lets himself pretend that it’s directed at *him*. It makes his heart skip a beat and he draws in a sharp breath, which makes Harrington look at him. The smile drops from his face, and he takes a step back.

“Sorry,” he says. “Didn’t mean to overstep.”

“No, it’s ...” Billy doesn’t know what to say. He settles for “It’s okay. I don’t mind.”

He doesn’t comment on Harrington bringing him groceries, or doing his dishes, and he tries to not let the awkward silence get to him. Instead, he prepares the bottle and moves to the couch and sits down in it to feed Sam, since it’s the only place in his apartment where he can do it while being somewhat comfortable. Harrington follows him, and stands there awkwardly for a couple of seconds while holding his water glass in both hands, before he seems to steel himself and sits down at the other end of the sofa, as far away as he can.

Billy wishes that he had a TV right about now, or at least *something* to distract them from each other and all this awkwardness. He doesn’t understand why Harrington is still here. He brought the groceries – bought food for his poor former classmate who can’t afford them – why doesn’t he take his brownie points and *leave*?

When Sam’s finished his bottle and Billy puts him on his shoulder to burp him, he risks a glance at Harrington, who’s watching him. Who has been watching him all of this time, without saying a word.

“Okay, what do you *want*?” Billy snaps, and winces at his own voice.

He didn't mean to come across so aggressive, but he doesn't understand why Harrington is here and he doesn't like being in the dark.

It startles Harrington into action though. He puts his glass – empty, now – down on the table next to Sam's empty bottle, and turns so that he's facing Billy somewhat.

"Look," he says, and he looks *nervous*, which makes Billy nervous too because whatever this is, is probably not good. "Don't take this the wrong way." And then he reaches into his pocket and brings out a couple of ten dollar bills that he puts on the table next to his empty glass.

And Billy's mouth goes dry. Because *of course* this wasn't just a friendly visit, *of course* it wasn't anything as simple as charity. Harrington *saw* him with that guy, after all, and knows he can barely even pay for his own goddamn food. He must figure that Billy is desperate enough to –

"I just figured ..." Harrington trails off with a helpless little shrug.

Billy takes a calming breath and tries to smother his anger and disappointment. He's got no reason to feel that way, after all; he should be *grateful* that he's figured out what Harrington wants. He *knew* it couldn't be a social visit, after all. He should honestly just be happy that the groceries weren't brought out of pity, but to sweeten the deal.

He clears his throat and looks up.

Harrington really *does* look awkward – he has probably never bought sexual favors from another guy before. In a way, that makes it easier for Billy, because he might not be a pro or anything, but at least he's got some experience. And it shouldn't be any different just because it's a former classmate (that he may or may not have snuck glances at from a distance back in school). Just because it's *Harrington*. Because a dick is a dick, right?

When Harrington opens his mouth to say something else, Billy interrupts him. "I gotta put Sam to sleep first." And then he adds, just

to make it clear that he's not backing out or anything, "Stay here."

And Harrington nods, a little awkwardly, and sits back in the couch while Billy stands up and pretends that he's not in a hurry when he goes to his tiny bedroom and closes the door behind him.

"Fuck," he whispers to himself as soon as he's out of sight. Sam's falling asleep in his arms already, and Billy puts him down in his nest of blankets in the corner of the bed – he really should buy a crib or something, at some point – and stays there for a couple of minutes, watching him sleep. He doesn't want to admit that he's trying to postpone what's about to happen ... but he's totally trying to postpone what's about to happen. Besides, Harrington doesn't know how long it takes for Sam to fall asleep. Billy can have a couple of minutes to himself to prepare.

He tells himself that this isn't any worse than it was that first time, with Gus. He'd gotten on his knees and sucked a guy's dick for the first time for all of thirty bucks, and then he'd done it again and again and again. This should be old news.

Just because it's someone who Billy *knows*, and who knows him, doesn't make it any different. Just because it's in Billy's space, in his apartment, doesn't make it any different. Just because Harrington *saw* him, *knows* about him, has the means to ruin his life with that knowledge, doesn't make it any different.

Just because Billy had just started to hope that *maybe*, maybe Harrington didn't actually want something ... that doesn't make it any different. It's still just a transaction – one where both parties walk away happy, after.

Right?

Right.

Then why is there a lump in his throat? Why does his stomach feel like it's full of rocks? Why is it so hard to turn around and walk back out into the living room?

Well. Billy's done a lot of hard things lately. This is no different from

those times.

He checks on Sam once more, makes sure he's sleeping soundly, before walking out into the adjoining room. Harrington's in front of the couch, looking ... worried? Nervous? Whatever, maybe it's his first time with a dude. He's standing up, which – Billy had figured he'd make himself comfortable in the couch while he had the chance, but maybe the guy prefers to look down on whoever is blowing him. Billy's not about to comment on it. Harrington paid for it, so it's up to him if he wants to sit down or not.

The money is still on the table, and Billy glances at it. Then he steels himself, plasters on a fake smile and walks up to Harrington with as much confidence as he can muster. Harrington takes a small step back, but is stopped by the couch, and Billy takes the opportunity to sink to his knees. The floor's not all that different from asphalt, really.

He hears Harrington draw in a sharp breath, and reaches for the guy's belt.

He is wholly unprepared for the force with which he's pushed back. He falls, knocks against the closest cinderblock and pulls the board down with him when he falls back. He catches a hard corner in his side, just under his arm, and it makes him hiss in pain and scrunch his eyes shut.

When he opens them again, hard of breath and eyes stinging, he kind of expects to be hit again. Expects to find Harrington standing over him, sneering, calling him a fag or a cocksucker or telling him how disgusting he is.

What he *doesn't* expect, is for Harrington to be standing on the couch – literally *on* it – and holding his hands out as if he's trying to ward Billy off, while visibly trying to keep his balance on the lumpy pillows.

Billy's confused for a couple of seconds, and when it becomes clear that he's not about to get beat up, the confusion morphs into anger. "What the fuck?"

“What are you *doing*?” Harrington hisses, and waves his arms around in some kind of gesture that is probably supposed to mean something, but that Billy doesn’t get.

“What do you *mean*, what am I doing?” Billy hisses back, getting to his feet and holding his side, grimacing. “I’m doing what you fucking *paid* me to do, you *ass*!”

At that, Harrington pales. “What? No no no ...” And he retreats – vaults over the back of the couch to put it between himself and Billy. Once there, he plants his feet and again holds his hands up, even though Billy’s not moving. “No, you don’t ... No! I wasn’t trying to– Did you think I was– *Shit*!” He takes a deep breath, runs a hand through his hair, and tries again. “Whatever you think that was –” He points at the collapsed table, where he had put the bills, “– it wasn’t ... I wasn’t trying to get you to do anything. Like that. I wasn’t! Jesus!”

Harrington’s not speaking in full sentences, and Billy’s sick of it. He’s angry and embarrassed and in pain and he just want this fucking day to be fucking over already. “Then *what*?” he snarls. “You just randomly hand out cash to guys who suck other guys’ dicks for money, huh? Without wanting something for yourself?”

Billy wouldn’t have thought it possible, given how pale Harrington already is, but the guy pales even *more* at this, and his eyes go wide. “You ...? Wait, for *money*? You mean that guy *paid* you?” For some reason, this seems to be more troubling for him that the whole sucking dick part, and he looks from Billy to the door where Sam is sleeping, to the crashed table made of collected building materials, to the single chair by the door, hidden under dirty laundry. Billy can practically see Harrington add it all together and come to the – honestly kind of reasonable – conclusion that Billy’s *dirt poor and desperate*.

Billy sees red. “What the fuck, Harrington?!” He’s still hissing, because he doesn’t want to wake Sam up if the crash didn’t wake him, but he puts enough venom in his voice that it makes up for the lack of screaming. “What’s your *problem*?”

“I’m ...” Harrington starts, and then sighs and drags his hands over

his face. “Look, I’m not trying to be a dick here, okay? I just. It’s a lot to take in.”

“A lot to– *What did you expect?*”

“Well I didn’t expect you to try to *get at my dick*, Hargrove!”

“Then why the fuck are you here?” Billy asks, grunting as he bends down to pick up the bills from the floor. He walks around the couch and waves them in Harrington’s face. “What was *this* about, huh?” He throws the money at Harrington’s chest.

Harrington replies by shoving him back – not too hard, just enough to make him stumble back a couple of steps. “I was trying to be *nice*.”

“Nice?!”

“Yeah, nice! Maybe you’ve heard about it? It’s this thing when you’re trying to do good things for other people!”

Billy wants to laugh, but he’s pretty sure it would come out hysterical if he did. “In my experience, people are only nice if they *want* something.” The words are harsh and Billy immediately regrets them, because Harrington looks like he’s been struck. He’s opening and closing his mouth like a goldfish, but no words come out. Billy’s anger dissipates. It leaves him feeling drained, like all strength has left him. “And sometimes not even then,” he adds, in a voice that sounds more weary than anything.

None of them speak for a moment, and when they do break the silence between them, Harrington is the first to do so. “Listen, I think that maybe there’s been ... a couple of misunderstandings, here. Can we ... can we just, talk?”

“Sure,” Billy says and drags a hand down his own face, because why the hell not, right? “But I’m gonna need something stronger than water for this.” He lets out a slightly hysteric giggle when he remembers that he doesn’t *have* anything stronger. “Want a glass of *milk*, Harrington?”

“You know what?” Harrington says, throwing his hands out. “Yeah. *Yeah*, I want a glass of goddamn milk. Jesus Christ.”

Billy picks up Harrington's glass from the floor – great, now he has *no* unchipped glasses – and takes it into the kitchen. When he comes back into the living room with two glasses of milk and some leftover cookies from The Bakery from yesterday – in for a penny, and all that – Harrington has righted the cinderblocks and the board, and is busy fluffing the pillows.

Billy, who knows that no fluffing in the world will make those pillows less lumpy, snorts. “Aren't you the perfect little housewife,” he mutters, and when Harrington looks up – having obviously heard him – he snaps his mouth shut and wordlessly hands over a glass of milk. He puts the plate of cookies down on the table and sits down on the very edge of the couch.

Harrington raises his eyebrow at the cookies, but Billy just give him a deadpan look and says “Ho ho ho,” making Harrington snort.

Instead of sitting down in the other end of the couch, Harrington sits cross-legged on the floor on the other side of the makeshift table. Billy wants to comment on it – there's something bitter on his tongue that wants out, because does he find Billy too disgusting to even sit next to now? – but then Harrington reaches for a cookie and he leans back a little, looking all comfortable, which takes the edge off Billy's irritation. So Billy takes a cookie too, and his eyes fall on the money, which are back on the table.

He doesn't even have to ask. He just slowly looks from the bills to Harrington. That's all it takes for Harrington to blush.

“Yeah, about that ...” he starts. “I really was just trying to ...”

“Be nice?” Billy suggests, and Harrington nods.

“I wouldn't have done it if I'd known you'd– If I had known.” He looks down into his glass of milk as if it holds the answer to life itself. “I just ... I just don't think that any child should– that any *parent* should have to choose between, like, food or, or diapers, okay? And that guy at the place where you work, he said that you've been through a tough time lately, and like, you *just* told me what you do for money, okay? So it's not like you don't need it, obviously! And like, I have it. And ...” He dares a quick look up and Billy's face must

show his skepticism, because he groans and makes a face before he puts the half-eaten cookie on the table and starts to stand up. “I’m just making this worse! Look, I just wanted to help, and now I feel like an asshole about it, and I’m just gonna leave, okay? I’ll go.”

But Billy stands up too, and before Harrington has the chance to leave – before Billy has time to consider it, even – he reaches out and grabs a hold of Harrington’s sleeve. Stops him from leaving.

“Sit down,” he says, and it sounds gruffer than he intended. He tries to soften his voice when he adds, “Finish your cookie.”

He wants to hold on to the anger, because it’s better than uncertainty or the thrill of fear, but it’s hard to be angry when Harrington sounds so earnest. And also, he realizes belatedly; he kind of jumped to conclusions there, and probably made Harrington very uncomfortable. He tries to imagine what he would have done if their positions had been reversed – if Harrington had reached for his belt like that out of the blue – and he’s honestly surprised that he didn’t get a fist to the face.

“I’m sorry,” he says, because he is.

It doesn’t seem to put Harrington at ease, though; quite the opposite, in fact. Harrington gapes at Billy and looks shocked, and Billy remembers with a twinge of regret that he never even apologized for their whole fight, almost a year ago now. When he opens his mouth to do just that – he’s trying to do better, after all; *be* better, for Sam – Harrington interrupts him.

“No, *I’m* sorry.”

“What the– no,” Billy says. “What are you sorry for?” And then they’re both trying to speak at once, and then they both fall quiet at the same time. It’s awkward. Billy opens his mouth to say something at the same time as Harrington does, and then both of them hold their breath, waiting for the other to speak. Fucking *ridiculous*.

Billy is the first to break. He can’t help snorting out a laugh, and then Harrington breaks, too. They both burst out laughing, and the weirdness of the whole situation overrides the awkwardness.

When they come down from it, the tension from before is broken, as if by magic.

Harrington sits back down – on the floor, still, but he doesn't leave, which is something – and stuffs his half-eaten cookie in his mouth before reaching for another one. Billy walks over to the door to his bedroom and checks on Sam, who's sleeping peacefully despite the noise, before sinking back into the couch. He groans and presses his palm to his temple, trying to stave off a headache.

“Oh man, this has been a day ...”

Harrington nods as if he knows what he's talking about, and nudges Billy's milk glass closer. “Drown your sorrows,” he says, making Billy snort out another laugh.

Harrington ends up staying around for a couple of hours – long after Billy would normally have gone to sleep. It's a bit stilted at first, because they don't really have a lot in common these days, but they talk about school and how weird it is to have graduated and what their old classmates are doing. They talk a little about their jobs. Harrington worked the summer at Scoops Ahoy, apparently, and after summer was over he was offered a full-time job, which he took since he didn't think he could get anything better. He looks down in his milk glass when he says this, and Billy suspects there's a story there, but he doesn't ask. In return, he tells Harrington about his job at The Bakery, and how Frank was the only one who gave him a chance.

That prompts Harrington into asking about Sam, and that's when the awkwardness dissipates. Maybe it's because no one has actually bothered to ask before, or maybe it's because Billy doesn't really know Harrington well enough to really care about his opinion. Maybe it's simply because Billy's lonely – whatever the reason, everything spills out of him then; everything that happened (well, he glosses over *some* things) that led to him living in a crappy one room apartment with his son.

“My *son*,” he says, and he looks up at Harrington all wide-eyed, because he's not sure he's ever said it out loud before and it's still so ... still so big.

Harrington is smiling. Come to think about it, Harrington has been smiling for a while now, while letting Billy go on and on, and –

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Billy asks, suddenly suspicious.

Harrington blinks and snaps out of whatever daze he was in, and laughs when he sees the look on Billy’s face. “Sorry, sorry, I just ...” He shrugs, a little helplessly. “Back in school, I never could have imagined this. This version of you.”

“That makes two of us,” Billy says, quietly. He’d been so woefully unprepared for Sam, and to have him just thrust into his life like that ... everything had changed overnight.

Maybe Harrington hears something in his voice, or maybe he just misunderstands his words, because he says, “No, no, I just mean ... I never knew you were so *human*.”

That startles a laugh out of Billy. “Uh, excuse me?”

Harrington looks a bit sheepish and gestures vaguely with his hand. “You know, you were always so ... like, intense about everything, and always in my face and all ‘look at me I’m from *California*’ –“

“I do *not* sound like that.”

“And now you’re ...” Harrington trails off, because there’s a sound coming from the bedroom. A little whine, and Billy knows that Sam’s awake.

“Sorry, I’ll just –“ He’s already standing, pointing to the bedroom, and Harrington smiles and waves for him to go.

He does, and once inside he sees that Sam has managed to kick off his blanket, and is now squirming on the bed with his face screwed up in displeasure. Billy picks him up, holds him close and sways him a bit back and fro, while patting his bum and humming softly. It works this time, in that it wards off the crying, but it doesn’t look like Sam is about to go back to sleep so Billy resigns himself to a long night – it’s already a quarter to nine! – and brings him out into the living room, holding him with both arms.

When he walks out there, Harrington has this strange look on his face, and says, simply, “And now you’re ... this.”

“What?” Billy asks, because he’s forgotten what they were just talking about.

Harrington just shakes his head and waves it off, and Billy decides to let it slide. If it had been something important, Harrington would have told him, or that’s what he tells himself anyway.

When Billy goes into the kitchen to look for a pacifier, Harrington follows, glancing at his wristwatch. He looks surprised when he sees how much time has passed, and then draws in a sharp breath before saying, “Wait, didn’t you say that you have to get up at like two am?”

“Yeah,” Billy says, and he can’t help the way the thought of it makes him grimace.

“Dude, that’s in, like, five hours ...”

Billy doesn’t bother replying, instead he just turns around and gives Harrington a *look* over his shoulder. A look that hopefully conveys ‘I know’ and ‘I’m used to it’ without words.

Harrington looks guilty at that. “I should probably get out of your hair, then. Sorry for keeping you up for so long.”

“No, it’s okay,” Billy says, and finds that he means it. To wipe the guilty expression off Harrington’s face, he continues, “This little guy slept since we got home from the store, so I knew he would wake up eventually. It’s better that he does it now while I’m still awake. I get groggy as hell when he wakes me up at night.”

A bit of oversharing, perhaps, but Billy blames it on the fact that he’s tired. And on the almost-friendly atmosphere.

Harrington nods, looking less guilty at least, but reaches for his jacket. “Yeah, but still. It’s getting late. Thanks for the ...” He snorts. “... milk and cookies.”

Billy groans at that. “Listen, it was that or baby formula.” He holds up one of Sam’s bottles in a half-threatening manner and watches as

Harrington throws up his hands in surrender.

“I wasn’t complaining! The cookies were good. But I’m gonna head out.”

Billy nods, and ignores the part of him that wants Harrington to stay, just a bit longer, even though Billy has to get up for work in five hours. It’s just been so long since he hung around someone his own age. Just talked shit for a while. And even though it’s Harrington, whom he never thought he’d hang out with, ever, it’s been ... nice.

He doesn’t say that, though. But after he’s given Sam the pacifier to stop him from starting to cry, he follows Harrington out of the kitchen and watches as he picks up his jacket and puts it on. He doesn’t do anything stupid, like walk him to the door or anything. But when Harrington turns around before walking out, giving a smile and a “See you later, Hargrove,” he nods and smiles back.

The door closes, and Billy doesn’t move. Listens to Harrington’s steps walk down the creaky stairs, and only when he can’t hear him anymore does he let out a long breath. He walks over to the couch, gets comfortable with Sam in his arms and picks up the purple dolphin – smiling when Sam’s chubby little hands makes a grab for it, as if he is trying to hold it himself.

Only then does he realize that Harrington left the money on the table, the bills folded under Harrington’s empty glass.

9. Billy and Steve

Notes for the Chapter:

Fair warning, guys. I'm unavailable for the weekend, so next update will be on Monday.

As expected, Billy doesn't get much sleep that night. Sam keeps him awake until a quarter past eleven, and when Billy finally gets to close his eyes and sleep, it feels like only minutes has passed when the alarm clock wakes him up, and it's time to go to work.

Billy blinks blearily at Sam, who's sleeping somewhat fitfully in the baby carrier, as he gets ready. He swears that one day, when Sam is a teenager, Billy's gonna wake him up at ass o'clock in the morning, just because he can. As payback.

He regrets the thought half an hour into work, when he has to check on Sam for the third time. Sam is unhappy, and won't lie still. He refuses to sleep, even when Billy ends up wrapping him in his blanket and rocking him for twenty minutes, anxiously watching the clock on the wall and knowing that he's already behind. In the end, he puts Sam in the harness and straps him to his chest, because Sam is usually calmer when he gets to be close to Billy. It makes it harder to do his job, but at least he has his arms free and can get *something* done.

Still, when Frank shows up around six thirty, Billy's way behind schedule. He also makes possibly the worst first impression, being mid-yawn when Frank walks in. Frank must notice that there are still things to be done that should have been done by now, but he doesn't say anything. Instead he frowns at the sight of Billy clumsily patting Sam's bum while trying to put buns on a cookie sheet one-handed.

"Rough night, kid?"

"Ugh," Billy says, eloquently. "Yeah. He won't sleep. Just keeps crying." Sam's crying right now, although they're more like exhausted little whines than anything else. Frank comes closer and takes a look at his red little face and puts a hand on his head.

“Is he sick?”

Billy freezes. He hadn't even thought of that. Hadn't even considered the possibility. Now, at Frank's words, his heart skips a beat and he looks down at his son, buns forgotten.

“I ... I don't know.”

Sam hasn't been sleeping regularly – more during the day and less during the night. And when Billy thinks about it, he *has* been crying more than usual for the last day or two. Has he been sick this whole time and Billy didn't know?

His face must show his sudden panic, because Frank pats him on the shoulder. “Don't worry, kids get sick all the time. Have you checked his temperature?”

Billy wordlessly shakes his head. He hasn't got a thermometer, didn't know that that was something he needed. He puts his hand on Sam's head too, and then takes a hold of his hands, one after the other. He's warmer than usual, his hands are usually colder – is it because he's been in the kitchen with Billy just now? Or does he have a fever? Has Sam been sick and Billy made it *worse* by keeping him with him in the kitchen?

He looks down at Sam's face – he's snotty, for sure, but is he snottier than usual? Should Billy take him to the hospital?

He asks this out loud, and Frank actually chuckles.

“No, I don't think that'll be necessary. I can ask Dolly to come and check on him, if you like? She was up when I left.”

Normally, Billy would say no, because he wouldn't want to be an inconvenience. But now, in the face of maybe having a sick child, he nods before Frank has even stopped talking. “Please.”

Frank makes the call, and Billy – on Frank's insistence – stays in the back room with Sam in his arms, getting some formula into him. He can hear Frank finish up outside, and feels bad about him having to do it on his own, but at the same time he's got his hands full trying to soothe Sam, and wiping his little nose.

It's a relief when Dolly shows up. She brings a thermometer (Billy learns, that Sam does *not* appreciate having his temperature taken) and declares that Sam have a slight fever but that he should be okay without medicine. She then proceeds to put Sam down in the baby carrier and prop him up with a towel under his head, "So he'll be able to breathe more easily," and pats Billy on the shoulder just like her husband did half an hour ago.

"Don't worry," she says, and Billy must look real worried for the both of them to want to reassure him like that. "He's fine. Just miserable. It's not easy being a baby with a nose full of snot and no way to let people know other than screaming."

And Billy's heart twists and he feels like an asshole for thinking of payback for the lack of sleep earlier, but it's also a relief to know that whatever Sam's caught shouldn't be dangerous. Dolly should know; having raised a child of her own *and* grandchildren. She says as much before she pats him on the cheek and leaves.

Frank checks in on him and Sam once Dolly's gone, and Billy is suddenly aware of how panicky he'd acted, just now. His cheeks warm. To cover up his embarrassment, he brings up yesterday's surprise visitor all casual-like. "By the way, I got a visitor yesterday. Which was unexpected, since no one knows where I live." Frank looks up, a little guiltily.

"Shit. Should I not have told him?" Frank drags a hand over his face. "I'm sorry, kid. He seemed like a nice enough guy, said he ran into you at the store and that you seemed a bit harried. He seemed worried about you."

Billy raises an eyebrow, and files that away for later in favor of addressing the issue at hand. "No, it's okay. It was a bit awkward, is all. We never really hung out, back in school. And Sam was kinda cranky in the store, which ... yeah, now we know why."

"He keep you up last night?" And Billy knows that he means Sam, but he can't help thinking of the way he and Harrington sat in his living room, just talking, for hours. It makes him smile.

"Yeah." And then he yawns again, because he hasn't slept and he's

exhausted.

Frank chuckles at that. “You look like shit, Billy.” Billy stops himself from saying that Frank doesn’t exactly look like he walked off a runway, either – because while he’s more comfortable around Frank these days, the man is still his boss. “I don’t think you should drive today. How about I do the deliveries, and you go home?”

“I’m not going home!” Billy says, loudly. Too loud; he glances down at where Sam has finally fallen asleep. “I mean, he’s asleep now. I can drive.”

“You’re basically asleep as well,” Frank says when Billy smothers another yawn. And then he brings out the big guns; “I just don’t think it’s safe for Sam. What if you fall asleep at the wheel?”

The risk of Billy falling asleep at the wheel is next to non-existent, even when he’s tired, but Billy doesn’t want to take any chances when it comes to Sam. By the grin on Frank’s face, he knows it, and knows that he’s won. “If you’re good, I’ll let you man the counter until I get back.”

He points to the bathroom. “Wash up, kid, you can’t have a face full of flour if you’re gonna be greeting customers!”

Billy grumbles, but does as he’s told.

The first hour in The Bakery is a breeze, usually, barely anyone comes in before eight. Billy takes the time to make sure that everything is perfect in the display, and then cleans up a bit and – when Sam wakes up – prepares a bottle and sits on the other side of the counter with him for a while, wiping his nose and making sure to hold him at the angle that Dolly showed him earlier.

Only one customer comes in while he’s sitting there with Sam – an older guy wearing a tool belt and a thick jacket, probably on his way to work or something – and he doesn’t even mention the baby. Just buys his bagel and leaves, without more than a glance at the Sam in Billy’s arms. Billy breathes out a sigh of relief. It seems that Hawkins is getting used to him and his son. There has been less openly hostile looks lately, and Billy hasn’t heard any barely-concealed whispers in

... probably weeks.

He doesn't delude himself into thinking that he's not still the talk of the town, but it's nice that things seem to be calming down.

Sam keeps relatively calm until Frank comes back, which is a relief. When Frank ties on his nice apron – the clean one that he uses when he's meeting customers, not the one he uses while baking – he says, “Oh, and I met your friend at the mall. He was there to bring in the bread. Asked about you.”

Billy blushes. His thoughts immediately going to Gus, or Chris, because those two are the ones who are usually there to meet him at the loading dock for the bread – and some extra services – but he can't really imagine any of them asking about him. The mystery is solved when Frank hands him a piece of paper on his way through the door. “He told me to give you this.”

It's a coupon from Scoops Ahoy, promising a 15% discount on any ice cream combination containing *cookies & cream*. The word ‘cookies’ has been underlined twice, and someone has scrawled ‘Made from real milk’ on the edge of it, and underlined the word ‘milk’, too. Billy doesn't have to guess who it is from, and snorts.

“You know,” Frank says, apropos of nothing. “You should consider yourself lucky that I don't make you wear a uniform for work.”

That makes Billy imagine Harrington's horrible sailor uniform, and he cackles before he can stop himself. From the pleased look on Frank's face, that was what he had been trying to achieve. He pats Billy on the arm and says, “Go home, kid. You're dead on your feet.”

A part of Billy wants to protest, but a bigger part of him is bone tired – and either way, as if on cue, that's when Sam starts to cry again, so he just nods gratefully, takes Sam and leaves.

It's a long day, which he spends taking care of a cranky baby who starts wailing if he tries to put it down, and he gets a back ache from holding Sam and sway with him for so long. After an afternoon and evening of taking random cat naps when he can get them, and a night during which Sam blessedly (and surprisingly) only wakes him up

once, he wakes up slightly less exhausted and goes to work like usual the next day. Sam seems to be feeling better, judging by the way he doesn't cry when he wakes up, but he only eats about half of what he usually eats, which means that Billy will have to feed him again soon, while at work.

It's a Thursday, and while Billy's gotten as much sleep as he's going to get, he's still feeling a bit slow. His head feels like it's filled with cotton and he's achy and sore.

Figuring that he slept wrong, and perhaps still feeling the effects of the lack of sleep from yesterday and the tension of the last couple of days, he doesn't think more about it, even though every dough he makes seems to be twice as hard to work into shape today. When Frank shows up, he makes sure to smile and keep up appearances, so that he will let Billy do the deliveries today.

He doesn't particularly mind staying in The Bakery to clean and greet customers, but he *wants* to do the deliveries today, just in case Harrington is there. He made a very specific kind of cookie this morning, in the event that Harrington shows up. He figures that if he isn't there, that's okay too – it's a cookie, he'll eat it for lunch or something.

After making all the other stops, he finally drives around to the back of the mall, and something hitches in his chest when he sees someone there, waiting for him. At first he thinks it's Gus, and is strangely disappointed until he gets closer and sees that it's actually Harrington, only in civilian clothing. No sailor costume to be seen.

Sam is sleeping soundly in the baby carrier next to him, like usual when he's in a car and sucking on a pacifier, and Billy makes sure he's comfortable before he exits the van. He gives a hesitant smile and a little wave, because they ended things on a friendly note last time but Billy doesn't have much experience with being friendly, so he isn't sure what the protocol is, here.

He needn't have worried. Harrington smiles and waves as well, and comes down the metal stairs to meet him.

"Hey, man."

“Hey.”

He helps Billy with the first crate, and then stands off to the side and watches Billy bring out the rest of them. He’s fiddling with something in his pocket, and for a second Billy thinks it’s money – expects Harrington to demand the same treatment as the guy he caught him with, after all. But then he shakes his head to get rid of those thoughts. Harrington has made it *very* clear that he doesn’t want that, and Billy’s not about to fuck anything up by bringing it up again.

It turns out that what Harrington is fiddling with is a pack of cigarettes, and when the crates are all stacked on the loading dock, he holds the pack out for Billy to take. And Billy wants to, really, but –

“I shouldn’t. I’m trying to quit.”

“What?” Harrington laughs, as if he can’t quite believe it.

Rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly, Billy shrugs. “Last time I was at a check-up with Sam this hippie-looking doctor said that smoke wasn’t good for the baby or something.” Harrington’s watching him as if he’s got two heads, and Billy can feel himself blushing. He can *see* Harrington adjust his view of Billy with every word, and has to remind himself that he *doesn’t care* what other people think about him anymore. Doesn’t care about his bad boy reputation. “Besides,” he adds, “that shit’s expensive.”

Neither he nor Harrington brings up the fact that the cigarette would have been free, since Harrington offered it to him.

Instead of making fun of him, Harrington just nods and puts the pack back into his pocket. He leaves his hand there, and puts the other hand in his other pocket too – an impressive feat, considering his pants are kind of tight – and then he just stands there, swaying a bit from side to side. He’s in a striped shirt and jeans, with a thick autumn jacket and sneakers. He looks good. Which Billy shouldn’t notice.

To distract himself from that, Billy clears his throat. “No uniform today?”

That makes Harrington laugh a little. “Not yet. My shift doesn’t start until eleven.” He seems to realize at the same time as Billy that that’s still a while away, and he shrugs, looking a little uncomfortable. “I had to drive Dustin to school earlier ... some kind of project that he needed to bring. And, well, I don’t mind being early to work, I know like half the people in the mall by now ...”

Billy silently wonders if Harrington knows Gus. Or Chris; if he even recognized him back then, or if he was too busy staring at Billy.

“Yeah,” he says instead of asking.

Harrington continues, “So I might as well help out, right?” He motions to the crates of bread. “The café is actually pretty busy, even after the summer, but less and less people are going for ice cream when it gets colder. Just trying to keep my eyes open for new opportunities, here. So I volunteered today.”

He laughs, and he sounds ... He sounds nervous.

It figures that things are still awkward between them, but Billy doesn’t like it. So he says “Well, I hope that Scoops doesn’t close down before I get to use that coupon,” and watches Harrington’s eyes crinkle in amusement.

“Okay you know that was a joke, right? I’ll give you a discount on any ice cream. Doesn’t have to be a particular flavor.”

“Wow,” Billy deadpans, but he’s grinning. “I feel so special.”

“You should,” Hargrove says. “You should have heard the kids nag me about discounts and free ice cream all summer. Believe me when I say that it’s not something that I just throw out, left and right.”

“I believe you,” Billy laughs.

“Good. It’s a special offer.”

Harrington’s looking at him, and Billy doesn’t know what to do with it, so he clears his throat. “That reminds me,” he says and walks back to the van. Opens the passenger side door and reaches into the glove compartment. “Got something for you.”

When he turns around, Harrington has followed him and is standing too close. They both take a step back at the same time, and then Harrington glances into the car and catches sight of Sam sleeping, and his smile widens.

“Aw, you brought Sam.”

“I always bring Sam,” Billy says and immediately regrets it because it makes him sound like he can’t afford a babysitter. Which is true, but still.

If Harrington notices it, he doesn’t say anything. Instead he leans past Billy to look more closely at the sleeping baby, and his smile goes a little soft. “Look at him in his little blanket.” The blanket was another yard sale find, and has small cartoon mice printed all over it. Billy secretly loves it. “He’s cute.”

Billy’s heart is doing something complicated, and he doesn’t notice that he’s holding his breath until the oxygen runs out and he has to take a big gulping breath. It’s just ... he loves Sam *so much*, and he desperately want other people to love him too. Frank and Dolly like him, and it’s making something warm spread out in Billy’s chest every time they show it, but the rest of Hawkins have generally been too busy judging Billy for who he is and what he’s done, to coo over Sam. And Billy doesn’t realize until now that it’s been bothering him. Because he *wants* them to love Sam, because Sam deserves to be loved.

So to see an old classmate – Harrington, of all people – go all soft as he looks at Billy’s son, is making Billy feel too many feelings at once. He clears his throat, because it feels as if something’s lodged there, and that makes Harrington straighten up. He looks like he’s been caught with his hand in the proverbial cookie jar. “I mean,” he says, hurriedly. “Most babies are kinda cute, right? When they’re not screaming, at least.”

“I’m glad you didn’t see him much these last couple of days then,” Billy says, trying to collect himself. “I mean, you saw him in the store.”

“Yeah,” Harrington says. “He was kinda cute back then, too, though.”

He gives a one-shouldered shrug. “But *loud*.”

“He gets that from me,” Billy jokes, and belatedly realizes that he might have just called himself cute. He’s about to clarify, when Harrington nods.

“Probably, yeah.”

What does that mean? Cute or loud? Probably loud ... Billy really wants to know, but doesn’t want to ask.

It’s been a while since he was socializing with people his own age, but he doesn’t remember it being this difficult to act normal. So in lieu of continuing that particular conversation, he thrusts the carton he’s been holding into Harrington’s hands.

“Anyway,” he says. “This is for you.”

Harrington opens the box with a curious look on his face, and bursts out laughing. Because in it, lying on top of an assortment of various cookies in traditional shapes, is one huge sugar cookie in the shape of a rectangle, and piped with icing to look like a coupon. On it, Billy has piped ‘*15% discount on all baked goods. Only applicable if your name is: _____*’, and then on the line, he’s written ‘Harrington’ in dark blue icing, as if someone wrote it with a pen. Or, well. He was *supposed* to write ‘Harrington’, but he ran out of room, so it only says ‘Harringt’.

Harrington’s still laughing, and it’s infectious. Soon Billy’s chuckling as well, and it feels *good*. He can’t remember the last time he laughed like that, with someone else.

Eventually, Harrington calms down and wipes at his eyes. “Thanks,” he says. “I needed that.” Then he lifts up the coupon cookie and gives an appreciative whistle at the other cookies, under it. Billy tries and fails not to feel pleased about it.

“How am I gonna redeem this one, though?” Harrington asks and turns the cookie over in his hand. “Bring it to the bakery?” Billy snorts at that, and imagines the look on Frank’s face if Steve tries to redeem a cookie coupon. Harrington nibbles on a corner of it and

gives Billy a look. "I'm gonna eat this long before I'll have time to redeem it, you know."

"Good," Billy says. "That was my plan all along. No discount for you."

Harrington pouts exaggeratedly, to which Billy just raises an eyebrow and says "I've got a kid, Harrington, you think giving me that look will work on me?"

"I *definitely* think it will work on you," Harrington says and breaks off another piece of cookie. "Just not by me, maybe." He points at Sam, sleeping in the front seat. "But when Sammy here grows up, and uses those big blue eyes on you? You'll be putty in his hands."

Billy refuses to comment, mostly because he suspects that Harrington is right. By the smug look on Harrington's face, he knows it, too. But he's nice enough not to say anything. Instead he turns his attention back to the coupon cookie and takes a big bite out of a corner, licking crumbs off his lips.

When he sees Billy stare at him, he shrugs and says, with his mouth full and spitting cookie crumbs all over himself, "I wouldn't have been able to redeem it anyway." He pauses to chew and swallow, and licks his lips again. Billy shouldn't find it so endearing. "My name's not *Harringt*."

He gives a shit-eating grin and Billy shoves him lightly. "Fuck off, not my fault your name is too long."

"You know," Harrington says. "You could just call me Steve." He looks at Billy for a moment, but then averts his eyes, too fast. "It's shorter."

A whole year in school together as rivals, and *this* is how they make friends? If Billy had known that all it took was some cookies, he'd have put on an apron a long time ago.

"Sure," he says, trying to play it cool. "Steve." He makes a show out of looking at the cookie. "Yeah, I could have fit 'Steve' in there."

Harrington – no, *Steve* – takes another bite of it and says, "Not

anymore!,” while grinning, teeth stained with red and blue icing. It makes Billy laugh again. He steals a cookie out of Harri- *Steve’s* box, and leans back against the van.

Neither of them are in a hurry to leave. It’s nice.

What’s less nice is that he’s obviously coming down with something; probably whatever Sam has. He ignores it with Harrington, he ignores it when he gets back to The Bakery and finishes his shift, and he ignores it when he goes to the store with Sam after work. But by the time he’s there he’s sweating, and is squinting against the fluorescent lights in the ceiling, and it’s getting harder to pretend that nothing’s wrong. His head hurts and his throat hurts and he’s *tired*, even though he actually slept okay last night.

He even puts the baby carrier with Sam in a cart, because Sam is suddenly too heavy for him, even though he’s just going in there for a few things and he’s out of there five minutes later.

When he gets home, he eyes the couch with a longing expression. What he wouldn’t *give* to be able to lie down for a bit. But while Sam slept most of the way home, he’s awake now, and cranky, and obviously still feeling the effects of whatever bug he just had – so Billy doesn’t have the time to rest. Sam cries, and Billy tries to give him some formula, and changes his diaper, and then eventually Billy just walks around the tiny apartment, holding Sam to his chest, swaying him gently from side to side and hoping that it’ll tire him out – meanwhile his own headache increases tenfold and he kind of wants to cry, too. The swaying works though, eventually, but it’s a *long* half hour before Sam’s cries turn to hiccups, and they finally fall silent. Billy continues to sway, in the middle of the room – he’s stopped walking around, because he doesn’t have the energy to – and eyes the kitchen. He should put Sam down and get something to eat. That’s what he usually does. But he’s so tired.

So, like he did a few days ago, he lies down on the couch with Sam on his chest. But he doesn’t sleep. The reason he doesn’t sleep, is because *Sam* doesn’t sleep. Sam is wide awake, and obviously enjoying lying on his stomach on Billy’s chest; He’s flapping his arms

around and making little chirping sounds and holding his head up and looking at Billy and everything around him, and occasionally he slaps Billy in the face with a tiny hand. It makes Billy smile, despite him feeling like shit.

“Did you get me sick, Sam?” he asks, hoarsely. Sam answers by blowing a disgusting little snot bubble out of one nostril, at which point Billy laughs until he starts coughing.

He sits up, and leans his head against the back of the couch. There’s something to be said about what Dolly told him about sleeping at an angle, he notices when he almost falls asleep right there, with Sam still in his lap. He has to force himself to stand and carry Sam out into the kitchen before he falls asleep for real.

It’s a somewhat miserable afternoon. He sleeps a little – like the dead – while Sam takes his afternoon nap, but after that Sam seems to feel good enough to want to be entertained at all time, which leaves Billy with no time to rest or shower. He eats a sandwich (two pieces of bread with two slices of cheese in between them, no butter) and drinks some water, and doesn’t even entertain the thought of cooking anything more complicated than Sam’s formula.

In the evening, when he’s started coughing at random intervals and is shivering even though he’s wearing his warmest sweater *and* is wrapped in his blanket, he puts Sam on one arm and walks downstairs to his neighbors – a couple in their mid-twenties – and borrows their phone. He calls Frank, and tells him that he’s sick but that he can still open, just, maybe not go the whole day ...

Frank scoffs at him over the phone and tells him to stop with the macho bullshit. He tells him to take a day off work and rest and get better and – when Billy tries to protest – “do you really want to be coughing all over the bread? Half of Hawkins will catch what you’ve got, kid.” He ends the call with an order to sleep as much as he can and drink lots of water, and to call him if he needs anything.

Billy nods, even though Frank can’t see him, and hangs up, biting his lip. He thanks the guy who let him borrow the phone, and drags himself upstairs again. His eyes are burning and there’s a lump in his throat – obviously symptoms of his illness – and he absent-mindedly

rocks Sam when Sam makes a little noise of complaint at not being entertained.

“Frank’s pretty great, huh?”

He imagines that Sam agrees.

The next day, he wakes up feeling absolutely awful. He’s drenched in sweat and everything hurts, and he’s momentarily grateful that he called in sick, because he barely gets to the bathroom before he’s coughing and has to sit down and lean his forehead against the coolness of the sink – he can’t imagine having to get all the way to the The Bakery and actually *work*. Drinking a glass of water and preparing a bottle for Sam is enough to make his hands shake.

He doesn’t even change out of the clothes he slept in, and doesn’t take a shower. He hasn’t got the energy to. The very small amount of energy he’s got goes into keeping Sam moderately happy. Sam seems to have overcome whatever bug he had, and is back to normal. He cries a bit around lunch, but a diaper change fixes that, and then he gets fussy again in the afternoon when he gets tired, after which he falls asleep soon after Billy puts him down in his corner of the bed. Billy crashes next to him, pulls up all the blankets he owns over himself, and is out within a minute.

He wakes himself up by coughing an hour or so later, but thankfully Sam sleeps through it. Billy stumbles into the bathroom and wets a towel with cold water, wrapping it around his neck. When he returns to the bed, he bunches the towel up and puts it on his forehead, not caring that it probably gets the mattress damp too.

Around six o’clock, there’s a knock on his door. By then he’s sitting on the floor, with his back to the couch and entertaining Sam with minimum effort (occasionally crinkling newspaper pages and waving them in Sam’s face until Sam grabs them and delightfully crinkles them himself). He can see the door from where he’s sitting – it’s not even far – but he can’t muster up the energy to get up and open it. He considers just pretending he’s not home, but then again. It might be Frank.

“Yeah?” he croaks out, and hopes that whoever’s on the other side of the door can hear him. If not, tough luck.

“Uh, Billy?”

It’s not Frank. It’s *Harrington*.

Or. Steve.

Billy has heaved himself to a standing position before thinking it through, and only sways a little on the way to the door. He opens it, and is faced with a smiling Steve who’s busy digging through a plastic bag before finding what he was looking for and triumphantly holding up a six-pack of beer.

“Your boss said you called in sick, so I thought I’d cheer you up with something stronger than milk!”

He laughs, and then he seems to take in what he’s seeing, and his smile falls off his face. Billy is struck by two things at once: One, Steve actually cared enough to seek him out. And two, Billy is *absolutely disgusting*; even worse than the last time. If Steve has any sense, he’ll run screaming.

Steve does not run screaming. Instead, his face morphs into a strange mix of worry and amusement.

“But it looks like you’re *actually* sick. Right.”

“Unk,” Billy says, eloquently, and then coughs.

“You look like shit.”

“Feel like shit,” he rasps, and opens the door wider. Not in a subtle invitation or anything, just ... he’s leaning against the door, that’s all. Steve seems to take it as an invitation, though, and pushes past him. Billy doesn’t stop him, but he does warn him. “Sam was sick before, and I caught it from him. You shouldn’t be here, Harrington, you –“

“Steve.”

“Steve. You’ll get sick, too.”

Steve doesn't seem to care. Instead he crouches down on the floor and says hello to Sam, who wiggles excitedly and huffs out air as if he's preparing for takeoff. After that's taken care of, Steve waltzes into the kitchen with the beers and puts them away in the fridge as if he owns the place. Billy just follows him in there, and leans against the doorway. His head hurts.

When Steve tuts at the contents of the fridge – which, not fair, Billy's got eggs and milk and everything now – and starts rummaging through his plastic bag without acknowledging Billy with a look, Billy somehow finds the energy to frown.

“What are you doing??”

“Soup,” Steve says and holds up a can that definitely didn't exist in Billy's kitchen a minute ago.

Billy's face must show his confusion, because Steve shrugs and looks a bit sheepish. “Well, I bought it as a joke at first, but you actually look like you can use some soup, so ... I'm making you soup.”

“You're making me soup,” Bill repeats, just to be certain that he heard it right.

“Yeah.”

Billy draws in breath to ask again, because it doesn't make sense. They've only really hung out twice in a non-hostile situation, and now the guy is in his kitchen, making him soup? Either Steve is pitying him, or it's a setup for some sort of elaborate joke. Billy doesn't want to know which one it is.

Before he can comment, though, he starts coughing again, and this time he doesn't get it under control until he's leaning forward and blinking as the world sways in front of him. Suddenly, there's a hand on his forehead, pushing aside sweaty curls. The hand is cold – at least it feels that way to a feverish Billy – and Billy closes his eyes, just for a second. Until it dawns on him that Steve is *feeling his temperature*, like he's a *child*. He frowns and swats the offending hand away.

“Stop that!”

Harrington – because he’s definitely back to Harrington now, the bastard – has the gall to *laugh* at him. In his own kitchen. The dude is obviously looking for a fight.

Billy must have muttered the last out loud, because Harrington raises an eyebrow mischievously.

“Oh, you think you can take me?” He reaches out and pushes at Billy’s shoulder. Not even hard, but Billy still stumbles back a couple of steps. “You’re weak as a kitten, dude.” Billy sways when he doesn’t have the doorway to lean on anymore, and tries to scowl. Judging by how Harrington’s eyes soften, he doesn’t look that impressive. “Just go lie down for a bit, okay? I’ll fix up some soup for you – might as well, I’m already here and you look like you haven’t slept for a week.”

“Can’t,” Billy mutters, even though his head is swimming. “Sam needs –“

“I can watch Sam while I warm the soup,” Steve – who suddenly earns back the right to being called by his first name – says, a bit exasperated. He motions to the baby on the floor, who’s happily smashing a balled-up piece of newspaper against the blanket he’s lying on. “Sam’s fine. I can handle it for ten minutes, okay? Go lie down.”

“I –“

Steve grabs his shoulder and turns him around, and marches him to the door to the bedroom. Billy could twist out of his grip if he wanted to, but he can see his bed through the crack in the door, and it’s calling to him. And Steve’s offering. And even if it is out of pity, or a setup for some kind of joke – at the moment Billy doesn’t care. He just wants to lie down for a bit.

He lets Steve give him a gentle push into the bedroom, stumbles two steps until he reaches the bed, and falls down on it, face first. The motion makes him cough, but he’s barely aware of it until he’s out.

When he wakes up, something is wrong. He's still sweaty, and achy, and his teeth are chattering, but that's not it. That's not what woke him up. There was a sound ... and just as he gets up on his elbows to try to figure it out, he hears it again.

A muted cry. *Sam's* muted cry.

He throws himself out of bed so fast that it gives him vertigo, and tangles his legs in the blanket so that he almost falls and cracks his head open on the doorframe, but he rights himself in time.

There's no one in the living room – *Sam's not where he left him!* – but there's a light coming from the door to the bathroom, slightly ajar. At the same time as he notices this, he notices the lack of light in the room. The reason he can see the light coming from the bathroom is because there is no longer daylight coming in through the windows.

He doesn't have time to think about that, though, because Sam makes another noise and his heart skips a beat and his lungs seize up. He yanks the bathroom door open with so much force that the door handle dents the wall, and prepares to fight whoever made Sam cry –

– but then he stops. Freezes, right there in the doorway. Because yes, Sam is crying, but – and Billy lets his eyes roam over his writhing little body to make sure of this – he's not hurt. He's lying on the floor, on a folded-up towel, and Steve is on his knees in front of him, frozen with one hand on a washcloth and the other shakily holding a clean diaper.

Steve stares at him, wide-eyed and shocked at his sudden entrance, and Billy feels all the air rush out of him at once. He sinks to his knees, right there, and leans on the door to keep upright.

“Uh,” Steve says, a little worriedly. “You okay?”

Billy's currently re-learning how to breathe, but sure. He takes a better look at Steve, who is still shaking. And very pale. “Are you okay?”

Steve grimaces, and nods to the corner of the shower behind him

where, Billy sees when he's craning his neck, a bunched up diaper lies. He looks at the clean diaper in Steve's hand. The washcloth. The way Sam's only wearing his shirt.

Steve is changing Sam's diaper.

Billy snorts, which sets off another coughing attack, and then he scoots forward on the floor. He grabs the edges of the towel and pulls it so that Sam is facing him, and bends down to that Sam can see him.

"Hey, Sammy." He makes sure to keep his voice as even as he can, even with the rasp of sleep and a sore throat. "Are you being a brat with Harrington? Huh?" He snaps his fingers a couple of times to get Sam's attention, and when he looks up, sufficiently distracted, Billy puts his hand on Sam's belly and rubs it a little. Sam falls quiet, and Steve's mouth fall open.

"How did you do that?"

Billy smirks and wiggles his fingers. "Magic touch."

Steve had managed pretty well with the cleaning, actually, so Billy just takes the diaper from him and expertly fastens it around wriggling baby legs. Then he lifts Sam up and bounces him a little, while still sitting on the floor. Sam puts a hand in his mouth and starts to suck, and Billy looks around for a pacifier. He's got a couple of them spread out around the apartment, because he never knows when he's going to need one.

"Amazing," Steve says, and by the way he blushes when Billy looks over, he didn't mean to say it out loud. "I mean. You're really good at that."

And now Billy can feel himself blush, too. He blames it on the fever. "I have to be," he says. "There's no one else to do it." He realizes, as he says it, just how true that is. That most of the time, he's really *alone* taking care of a baby. Sure, he could call Frank and Dolly at any time, probably, and they would be happy to help, but he doesn't want to have to rely on his boss for more than a steady income. Billy doesn't want to be a charity case.

Not counting Frank, Billy has no one.

To distract himself from the sudden lump in his throat, he tries to get up from the floor. Unfortunately he's still feeling weak, and with the way he's holding Sam it's not going very well. He sighs, embarrassed – because it seems like every time Steve sees him, he gets to witness Billy at a new low – and considers just staying here, on the floor. But suddenly there's a hand in his vision, and when he looks up, Steve's standing there with his hand out, waiting to help Billy up.

Billy looks from the hand, to Steve's face, and back to the hand. He swallows. And then he takes the offered hand and lets Steve help him to his feet. If he sways a bit and stumbles into Steve's space, then it's just because Steve pulled too hard, that's all.

"Thanks," he murmurs, and licks his lips. Then, "Wait, what time is it?"

Steve checks his watch and winces. "A quarter to ten?"

"Ten?" That means that he slept for almost four hours. That doesn't ... happen to him a lot. "What ..." *Why did you stay? Why didn't you wake me? Why are you here?* He doesn't know how to word his questions without him getting answers that he may not be able to handle, so instead he settles for, "What happened to the soup?"

It startles a laugh out of Steve. "Would you believe me if I told you I burned it?"

"You burned ... soup?" Billy asks, just to make sure he heard that right. "How do you burn soup?"

"Surprisingly easy, actually."

They move out into the kitchen, Billy still carrying Sam. "But soup is a *liquid*."

Steve reaches down in the sink and fishes up a saucepan that, okay, yes, is black and burned in the bottom. "Turns out that even liquid burns if left too long on the stove. At least if one is, say, distracted by an adorable baby who's trying to rip your hair out by its roots."

Billy winces and looks down on Sam, who looks unrepentant gnawing on his fist. "Sorry about that."

Steve actually laughs at that. "Not your fault. He may take after you in a lot of things, but somehow I don't think you'll stoop to hair-pulling, at least." They both fall quiet at that, probably both thinking about their fight last November. Then Steve clears his throat. "Anyway. I left this to soak," he holds up the saucepan before putting it back in the soapy water in the sink, "but it doesn't look like it can be saved. Sorry. I'll buy you a new one."

Billy got it in a second-hand shop for like two dollars, but doesn't say so. Instead, he shrugs it off. "No need. I'm just ... wow, I'm just amazed that I got four hours of sleep." He's still feeling like shit, but at least he no longer wants to cry. Which is something. "Thank you."

Smiling, Steve gesticulates with his thumb at the door. "I should go. It's getting late, and you're probably not used to staying up this late."

It's probably a dig at him, but Billy can't find it in him to be angry about it. Also, it's kind of true.

When he doesn't comment, Steve's eyebrows goes up. "Anyway. I'll see you around, I guess."

Billy nods, because if Steve is going to make it a habit to pick up the bread when Billy delivers it, then yes, they'll see each other around. He doesn't dare hope for a repeat of today, although it marks the second time that Steve has shown up on his doorstep.

He's not sure that today counts, though. He was asleep for most of it.

Which is a shame, really. Because Steve actually showed up – on a Friday night, no less – with *food*, and watched Sam while Billy slept for *four hours*. He even attempted and almost managed a diaper change. Just thinking about it makes Billy feel off-kilter.

"Thanks, man," he says, and *sticks his hand out* like a dork. Like they've just closed a deal or something, right here in Billy's hall. Steve looks at him as if he's lost his mind, and honestly, Billy's pretty sure he has. What goddamn eighteen year old goes for a handshake?

Steve takes it though, before he can pull it back – thankfully in a more bro shake than a proper handshake, to save both of their dignity – and then puts his finger in Sam’s little hand too, in a faux-handshake. Sam watches his with drool running down his chin, and Billy gets to watch Steve’s face melt into a smile. The kind of smile that is just ... irresistible.

Then Steve takes a deep breath and straightens up.

“Okay. Well it’s been fun.”

Billy snorts at the lie. Steve, to his credit, looks almost sincere. “No, really! Me and Sam had a great time – you just weren’t around to see it!” With that, Steve opens the front door and walks out. He says, “Sorry about the soup” with a little wince, and then gives a dorky little wave before walking down the stairs.

And Billy’s left standing there, with Sam on his arm, watching until the hallway is empty and listening to Steve’s steps as he leaves. It’s only when he hears the front door open that he notices that his own arm is up in a dorky wave, too.

He hurriedly takes it down, blushing, even though no one is there to see him. No one except Sam, at least, and Sam doesn’t look like he’s judging. In fact, Sam is too busy leaning his head into the crook of Billy’s neck and drooling on his shirt to look like he cares at all.

“You tired?” Billy says, and hopes that he is. Decides to give it a try. Because even after four hours of uninterrupted sleep, Billy feels like he could sleep for twelve hours straight, right now, if given the chance.

There’s a lot of things to do before that, though. First, he puts Sam to sleep. It only takes a little while and Sam only whines a little, which is probably due to Steve keeping him awake the whole evening – one more thing to be grateful to Steve about.

When Sam’s sound asleep in his little nest of blankets on the bed, Billy ambles out into the kitchen. He never did get that soup, but he knows he should eat *something*. Only, when he’s there, he sees the plastic bag that Steve brought, still on the counter. He grabs it to

throw it away, figuring it'll be empty – but it's not. Looking inside, there are three kinds of candy bars inside, and a pack of gum.

Maybe Steve didn't trust his own soup-warming skills enough and wanted to have some backup, or maybe he brought them over to be nice. Either way, Billy could *cry* when he sees them. He takes a Snickers bar and opens it while sniffing – he's got a stuffed nose, that's all – and downs a glass of water right there at the sink.

Then he takes his Snickers bar, and goes to bed.

Billy spends a pretty miserable weekend cooped up at home with Sam, doing as little as humanly possible when one has to take care of a baby. He only goes as far outside as to throw out the trash, since it was starting to smell and bothering even his stuffed-up nose.

He drinks a lot – as per Frank's instructions – and sleeps as long and often as Sam will allow him, which honestly isn't very long and often at all. But by Sunday, he's pretty sure the fever has gone down and his headache has lessened, and while he's still coughing, his throat feels less raw.

Frank stops by on Sunday evening, with a foil-covered pan, a bottle of pills, and a multi-colored soft fabric ball that makes a jingling sound when he shakes it.

"For you," he says and throws Billy the bottle of pills, ignoring the way he fumbles when trying to catch it. "Also for you," he continues and places the pan on the counter. And then he spots Sam on his blanket on the floor behind the couch and ignores Billy completely as he makes his way there, crouches down and shakes the ball in front of Sam's eyes. "And for my favorite little guy!"

Sam is suitably enthralled by this new thing, and Billy can't help but smile at the sight of his boss on his knees on the floor, playing with the baby. He checks the label on the pill bottle, finds that it's supposed to help against fever and headache, screws the lid open and swallows one dry. Frank watches him, and then painstakingly gets to his feet.

“Right,” he says and nods to the pan. “Dolly was worried you weren’t eating properly, so she made you lasagna.”

“I’m eating,” Billy protests.

“Anything but sandwiches?”

“Yes?” Billy says, and hates that it comes out as a question. But he’s not lying. He’s also been eating the chocolate that Steve left him, and those are *not* sandwiches. He doubts that Frank or Dolly would be impressed with it though, so he doesn’t elaborate.

“Sure,” Frank says, obviously not believing him. “I’ll let her know you’ve been eating three healthy meals per day.”

Billy snorts at that. “You do that.”

Frank comes up to him and looks at him closely, and Billy has to concentrate hard not to let a cough escape even though one is tickling at the back of his throat. Then he is blindsided when Frank puts his hand on his forehead, checking his temperature just like Steve did.

“The hell?” Billy says and backs up. “I’m better!” And then he ruins it by ending the sentence in a rattling cough.

“Uh-huh,” Frank says. “That may be, but you’re not coming to work tomorrow.”

“But –“

“No buts, kid,” Frank says. “Can’t have you cough on all the bread, can we?”

It makes sense, but Billy feels bad. Both because he’s supposed get up early so that Frank doesn’t have to – Billy only got the job because Frank felt he was getting too old to keep those hours – but also ... Billy doesn’t want to admit it, but he needs the money. He could barely stand on Friday, so going without work for one day was unavoidable, but now? He’s not at one hundred percent but he’s well enough to power through if Frank would only let him.

“I could do something else?” Billy tries, and tries to think of what he could possibly do in a bakery that keeps him away from the merchandise. “I could ... clean ... clean the van, or the back, or ...?”

Frank turns to him, and Billy goes quiet. He doesn’t want to seem desperate. It seems that Frank understands anyway, because he bites his lip and gives Billy a calculating look.

“How are you with numbers, kid?”

And that’s how Billy ends up spending both Monday and Tuesday at home, going through The Bakery’s books. He has no idea what he’s doing on the first day, but Frank shows up on Monday after work and shows him where he went wrong. Billy would think that it was a ploy to get him to stay home, but Frank looks so genuinely pleased that he doesn’t have to do it himself. It’s the kind of joy that can’t be faked, so Billy doesn’t even feel bad for staying home until he’s better.

Things go back to normal. Except that Frank is starting to teach him how to manage the books properly, for a while every day after Billy comes back from doing the deliveries. And he doesn’t meet up with Gus or Chris anymore (he nods at Chris if he sees him, but doesn’t approach him. Gus is there to bring in the bread one day, but is shifty-eyed and says that it’s been fun, but it might not be the best idea to continue what they’ve been doing. Billy agrees. He’ll miss the extra income, but he’ll manage without. It’s getting too cold to be doing what they were doing behind the dumpster, anyway.)

Another new development is that Steve keeps showing up on his doorstep, usually with a flimsy excuse that ends up with the two of them (and Sam) just hanging out for a while.

As surprising as it is at first, it’s not unwelcome. The more they hang out, the more comfortable they get in each other’s presence, and Billy realizes how much he’s missed to have someone to just shoot the shit with. And Steve is perfect for that – he isn’t bothered by their frequent interruptions when Sam demands attention, and he’s wholly accepting of the fact that Billy is usually wiped out at around seven pm, and makes sure to come up with an excuse to leave before then.

At first, he shows up maybe twice a week, usually with food. But as the weeks pass, he comes by more often. Usually in the evenings, for an hour or two; bringing something easy to cook or even takeout, ignoring Billy when he insists on paying for it with a “My parents aren’t around a lot, it’s just nice with some company”. If he’s working the late shift at Scoops he usually sticks his head into the bakery before going to work when he knows Billy’s going to be there, always making sure to buy some kind of baked treat that he nibbles on (“I forgot breakfast!” being his favorite excuse) while he talks to Billy or plays with Sam.

If Frank minds that Steve keeps coming in there to hog Billy’s time while he’s on the clock, he doesn’t say anything. In fact, he keeps giving Steve discounts, and using him as a tester for “new recipes” that Billy knows for sure that he’s been baking forever. When he asks Frank about it, Frank shrugs, entirely unapologetic. “He’s your friend,” is what he says, as if it’s as simple as that.

And maybe it is. Because they *are* friends, now. Not even Billy can deny that, not after Steve shows up at his apartment four days in a row with takeout. It’s gotten to the point where Billy automatically smiles when he hears a knock on the door, knowing that it’s probably Steve. He tells himself it’s because of the free food, but it’s not. Not really. It’s just ... nice to have a friend to spend time with.

Steve doesn’t seem to have many friends his own age, either. Most of the ones he did have are either away at college by now or busy with school. That doesn’t mean that he’s without friends – it only means that most of his friends are kids; and nerdy ones, at that. He laments that fact often when he’s over.

“You’re like, the only friend I’ve got left who doesn’t read nerdy books –” Billy pointedly doesn’t mention his well-read Tolkien paperbacks which are still stuffed into crate in a corner of the room, “– and you’re definitely the only one I can have beer with!” He lifts the beer he’s currently holding – it’s a Friday, and he’d shown up with pizza and beer to celebrate a weekend off work – and Billy holds up his own in a toast. And smiles.

Notes for the Chapter:

Courting through cookies. It's a thing, or at least it
SHOULD be.

10. Billy and Max

Notes for the Chapter:

Double updates today, since I haven't updated for a couple of days (and the next chapter is an interlude).

One day, when Billy gets home, there's a cardboard box outside his door. Inside are a bunch of random baby stuff; clothes, blankets, a wooden rattle – and a teddy bear. All of it looks second-hand, except for the bear. The bear itself looks brand new, except for the shirt that it's wearing; it's a black shirt, not exactly the right size and with visible seams – obviously home-made – and then someone has stitched “Metallica” onto it, with white thread.

If not for the bear, Billy would have thought that maybe Dolly came by to leave him some stuff while he wasn't home. But the bear? He doesn't think he's even mentioned his music taste to his boss or his wife, and it's not like he wears band shirts to work.

So he figures it must be Steve – it makes him snort out a laugh, imagining him with a needle and thread, painstakingly trying to make clothes for a teddy bear – and the next day when Steve comes over, Billy's put the teddy bear on the floor next to where Sam is playing, waiting for Steve to say something.

But all Steve does is throw a glance at it and huff amusedly, as if maybe he thinks that Billy sewed that ‘Metallica’ onto it, before lying down on the floor in front of Sam and turning his attention onto the baby. And Billy is confused.

“Steve,” he says and walks over to them. Nudges the bear with his foot. “Recognize this?”

Steve looks up. “No? Should I?”

He's not playing dumb. Steve's a bad liar, Billy's learned that already. Which means that Steve *didn't* put the box outside his door. Just to be sure, though, Billy asks;

"So you didn't leave a bunch of baby stuff outside my door yesterday?"

"Uh, no?"

Billy once again entertains the thought that it was Dolly. And that Frank somehow forgot to mention it. But the bear. The Metallica bear. It doesn't make sense.

"Someone left a box here yesterday, full of stuff," Billy explains. "The bear was in it." He shrugs. "I thought it was you." Because no one else knows where he lives. He doesn't say that. It sounds a little too pathetic, even for him.

"No," Steve says again, and then looks like he's being stuck by a thought. "Do you need more baby clothes? Should I ... bring a bear?"

It's adorable, in a way, how he looks like he suddenly remembered he left the stove on or something. Billy is quick to reassure him. "No, dude, he's got a bear already." He nudges it with his foot to make a point. "And he's got plenty of clothes now." All of it second-hand and hand-me-downs, but they're warm and they aren't too small, and that's all Billy needs for Sam. "I just ... I wonder who left it there."

It's a mystery. He can't think of anyone who would do it. The receptionist at the doctor's office has his address, and she's always happy to see him and Sam, and the lady at the library is usually lenient with Sam making sounds when Billy checks out books, but he can't imagine any of them doing this.

Then who?

Steve makes a sound in the back of his throat, and when Billy looks at him he looks guilty. Like he knows something. Maybe it's not such a mystery after all.

"What?" Billy asks.

"Nothing," Steve lies, trying to look innocent. When Billy keeps looking at him, one eyebrow raised, he breaks out laughing. "Stop doing that!"

“Do what?”

“Use your dad-stare at me!”

Billy’s mouth falls open. “I don’t have a dad-stare!”

“Yes you do, that’s exactly the face you’re gonna make when Sam grows up and you’re gonna try to make him admit to, like, eating cookies before dinner or something.”

“Shut up,” Billy says, and feels his cheeks heat up. It’s half-hearted, though, because he thinks of Sam growing up and trying to steal cookies, and his heart goes all soft and warm – like it’s wrapped in cotton. Steve’s eyes soften when they see him blush, and it makes Billy’s heart skip a beat.

It is enough to distract him. It’s not until Steve has left and Billy’s in bed and about to fall asleep that he remembers that Steve looked like he *knew* something. He makes a mental note to ask him about it the next time they see each other.

It’s two days later when they meet up again. Billy’s doing the deliveries and Steve is waiting for him. He’s in his work clothes, so he’s obviously working the early shift. It’s strange for him to pick up the bread on those days – usually he’s busy in the shop – but Billy doesn’t question it. At least not until Steve starts acting weird.

For one thing, he helps unload the van. For another, he immediately climbs up the stairs again after, to bring the crates inside. When Billy gives him a weird look, Steve shrugs a little helplessly. “Sorry I can’t stay, there’s a lot to do at Scoops today.”

That sounds like an excuse, and Billy’s heart twists in sudden irrational fear that Steve doesn’t want to be his friend anymore – but then he tells himself that that’s bullshit, because Steve obviously showed up here to see him even if they had a lot to do at Scoops. He’s proven right when Steve bites his lip and says, “But I can come by yours after work? I mean. Can I come by? After I get off work?”

Billy’s instantly suspicious. “You’ve never asked if you can come by,

before.” That’s true. Steve has made a habit out of just ... showing up. Probably because he knows that Billy’s almost never doing anything, and also that Billy never says no when Steve brings food.

“That’s because you don’t have a phone,” Steve says. “I can’t very well call and ask, can I?”

“A phone would wake Sam up if he was sleeping,” Billy says, and doesn’t mention that his budget doesn’t allow for a phone – and besides, who would be calling him? “Can’t risk it.”

“Whatever,” Steve says, but he’s smiling as he brings the last bread crate inside. Before the door closes, he throws a “See you later!” over his shoulder, and it’s only then that Billy realizes that he didn’t get a chance to ask what he knew about the box.

That evening – or afternoon to most people, maybe, since it’s only a quarter past five, there’s a knock on the door. Billy has just changed Sam’s diaper and hasn’t bothered to wrangle him into clothing just yet, so the little guy is only wearing his diaper, with a pacifier in his mouth. Billy’s holding him easily in one arm when he goes to open the door, expecting Steve.

And it is Steve. Only, he’s not alone. Max is standing there too.

For a second, Billy doesn’t breathe. He hasn’t talked to her since he moved out, and the time he and Sam spent in the Hargrove-Mayfield household was ... tense, to say the least. He had his hands full adjusting to fatherhood while walking on eggshells around his father, and barely remembers her from that time. Since then he’s seen her around town, from a distance, but he hasn’t approached her. Hasn’t known what he would say if he did. Hasn’t been sure he wanted to, actually – they’ve had their bouts and shouting matches in the past. It’s not like he has *missed* her.

And yet, his heart lurches painfully at the sight of her.

In the months that has passed since he moved out, she’s grown. She’s taller, and looks ganglier. And now she’s standing on his threshold

with her shoulders hunched up around her ears and eyes wide as if she's a rabbit and Billy is oncoming traffic. Billy is certain that she'd have bolted if it wasn't for Steve's hands on her shoulders, gently holding her in place.

They stare at each other for a second, which feels like an eternity, before Billy rips his eyes away from her and looks up at Steve. "What ... what's she doing here?"

He asks Steve, because he can't bring himself to ask her. To address her. He wasn't prepared for this. When Max wrenches out of Steve's grip and mutters "This was a stupid idea," he realizes how that sounded.

"Wait!" It's out of his mouth before he can stop himself – before he's even decided whether it is a good idea or not. But it works. She stops, half turned away. When she looks over her shoulder, she looks small. Hesitant. And her eyes flick to Sam.

"Uh," Billy says and takes a step back, opens the door a little further. He can't bring himself to actually say the words to invite them in, but Steve solves that problem by grabbing Max by the shoulders again and frog-marching her into the apartment. Billy just stands to the side and lets him, before closing the door behind them.

Then they all just stand there awkwardly, none of them speaking. Luckily, Sam is a baby and excited to meet new people, so he lets out a little shriek and squirms like an oiled-up piglet, and just like that the ice is broken. Steve snorts out a laugh, and even Max's lips twitch a little. When she sees Billy notice her half-smile, it falls from her face.

"I wasn't even gonna come!" she blurts out, and then shrugs. "But Steve made me."

"Oh yeah, sure, blame me," Steve says with an eye-roll and turns his back on the rest of them in favor of walking into the kitchen. Billy hears the fridge door open. "It's not like you kept asking about him every chance you got, or anything!"

Max's face goes splotchy and red – she never did blush prettily. But

she doesn't deny it.

And that's when it hits Billy. "The box. With the baby clothes. That was you?"

She doesn't need to answer; the look on her face is enough. If possible, her face goes even redder, and he recognizes the wrinkle between her eyebrows as the kind of anger that hides embarrassment. She probably picked it up from him, in the first place.

"I didn't —!"

"Thanks," Billy says quickly, before she can work herself up. She is stunned silent at that; obviously didn't expect it. Billy didn't, either, and now that he's said it he doesn't know how to continue. He bounces Sam a little on his arm and says, "Where did you even get all of that?"

She hesitates, before answering. "Mike's mom was cleaning when we were over. She was gonna throw it out, so I asked if I could have it." She looks like she's expecting him to throw the stuff out, just because it apparently belonged to one of her nerdy little friends or something.

Billy doesn't give a shit where she got it from. Free stuff is free stuff, and he's not looking a gift horse in the mouth. Even if it's from Max.

"And the bear?" he asks, voice neutral.

"Found it in a shop in Indianapolis when I went there with mom and Neil," she says, missing how Billy looks up sharply at the mention of his father. "Mom got it for me."

"What kind of shop sells bears with Metallica shirts?"

And there it is again, a hint of a smile. "It used to have a *pink bow* around its neck, Billy! Probably why mom even agreed to pay for it ..." She rolls her eyes, and it's such a familiar thing to see even though they haven't lived under the same roof since the spring that Billy kind of aches with it.

"Oh the horror," he says, deadpan, and fighting against a smile. "Have to say, the shirt is a vast improvement then."

She shuffles her feet, looks down and to the side, pretends to be very interested in the plastic crates that are standing by the wall (Billy really should get some shelves for his stuff). Then she mumbles, “I made it in Home Ec”, her face still flushed. As if she’s embarrassed. Or proud. Or unsure about how Billy will react to it.

She hates Home Education. Always went on and on about how she didn’t want to take it, because she didn’t need to know that stuff. Billy can imagine her there, painstakingly stitching ‘Metallica’ onto a tiny shirt for a bear, and his heart does something weird and he gets the strangest urge to pull her close to him and, like, ruffle her hair or something.

“I didn’t think you liked that class,” he says, mostly to distract himself before he can act on it.

She gives a one-shouldered shrug. “Well, they said we had to do clothes, and that we had to do embroidery. They didn’t specify *what*.”

“Well,” Billy says. “Sam really likes it.” It’s not a lie; Sam spent a good ten minutes yesterday chewing on the bear’s left ear and trying to rip one of its plastic eyes out – but he may not have any strong opinions on the shirt, other than that it’s perfect to drool on. *Billy* likes it, though – not that he plans to tell her that.

She looks up, pleased and a little bit hopeful. Her poker face is shit – he’d hoped she’d learned how to school her expressions by now as it’s something that one needs to do around Neil.

Well. It was something *he* needed to do around Neil, anyway.

Before his mood sours at the thought, she turns her gaze to Sam and actually smiles. “He’s gotten so big.”

Billy shifts his weight from one foot to the other and deflects. “Yeah, and *heavy*.” Max’s fingers twitch at her sides and she makes an aborted motion. Not until then does Billy realize that they’re still standing in front of the door, that they never made it further into the room. He speaks before he lets himself think it through. “You wanna hold him?”

She never held him when Billy lived on Cherry Lane. He doesn't even remember her touching him, then – she mostly kept to her room or out of sight. Of course, it was a couple of tense weeks – Billy was stressed all to hell, Neil was keyed-up, Susan was anxious. He can't really blame Max for making herself scarce during that time.

She doesn't answer, and he takes the liberty of steering her over to the couch by her elbow. Figuring that she doesn't really mind since she's not loudly protesting – because she's always loudly protested against things she doesn't like in the past – he all but pushes her down on a cushion, and then holds out Sam to her.

"I don't –" she starts, but her arms shoot up to grab him anyway. When Billy sees that she's got a good hold under Sam's arms, he lets go and takes a step back.

He thoroughly enjoys the deer-in-the-headlights look that she throws him, before having to turn her attention back to the wriggling baby in her grasp. The wriggling baby, who seems to be confounded about this new person holding him. He's used to Billy holding him, and maybe, occasionally, Dolly or Frank – and all three of them are used to holding babies. Max has never held a baby in her life, and it shows. She holds him as if he's a bomb about to go off.

A snicker escapes Billy, before moves in to help. "Just hold him firmly, don't let go ..." He puts his hands over hers and bounces Sam a little, up and down, and Sam's legs start bouncing along, his feet on Max's thighs, "... and there you go!" He backs off again, and this time Max looks a little more confident. Sam is delighted about the bouncing, and windmills his arms around. Judging by the wondrous look on Max's face, he is also smiling.

Billy smiles too, at the sight. He has never been able to resist it, when Sam is smiling at him, and he's pleased to see that Max isn't immune to it either.

And then he looks up, and sees Steve watching them from the entrance to the kitchen, casually leaning against the doorframe; a smile of his own on his lips. And he looks at them with such a soft expression that Billy's breath gets caught in his throat for a moment.

“You’re doing great,” he tells Max and leaves her in the couch, ignoring her suddenly panicked expression and half-formed protests at being left alone with the baby. Instead he walks out into the kitchen – Steve moves out of the way to let him pass.

“You have nothing in your fridge,” Steve says, apropos of nothing.

“Lies,” Billy says and opens the fridge door, showing off all the basic necessities, plus the messy remains of a cake that was unsellable because Billy accidentally dropped it on the counter the previous day – he’d apologized and tried to fix it, but it still looked like the leaning tower of Pisa when he was done, and Frank had laughed and told him to take it home so it wouldn’t be wasted.

“I mean you have nothing that’s suitable for *guests*,” Steve says, rolling his eyes.

“That’s because I didn’t *know* I’d have guests,” Billy replies, pointedly.

Steve has the good grace to blush a little at that. “I told you I’d come by after work ...”

“Uh-huh.”

“Look,” Steve says, throwing a glance out to the living room and lowering his voice. “Don’t be a dick, alright? She’s been asking about you since she learned that we started hanging out, and then she apparently *followed* me one day to find out where you live, just to leave you that stuff. She obviously cares enough about you that –”

“Yeah yeah,” Billy cuts him off, a little choked up, because if he has to listen to any more of this he’s gonna embarrass himself by crying or something. He clears his throat and says, quietly, “Thanks.”

Glancing up, he sees Steve’s posture relax and the smile return to his face. He looks pleased, like the cat that got the canary – like he knows how big Billy’s heart feels right now – and Billy shoves him just to wipe the grin off his face.

“Whatever. Shut up.”

The grin only widens. To distract himself, Billy walks over to the fridge too and starts rummaging through it. It is woefully empty of things to feed guests with, but to Billy's defense the only guest he gets is Steve – and Steve usually brings the food.

He says as much to Steve, who shrugs unapologetically. “We didn’t have time. She wanted to come right over after we picked up the –” And then he cuts himself off mid-sentence, with a guilty look out to the living room.

“The what?”

“Nothing.”

Billy huffs. “God you’re a shitty liar.”

“Am not!” Steve says, petulantly.

“What are you, *five*?” Billy laughs. “What were you saying? What did you pick up?”

Steve straightens up – he’s got an inch on Billy, which Billy hasn’t really noticed before – and shakes his head. “Nope. I may not be a good liar, but I’m a good *friend*. It’s Max’s surprise and I’m not telling.”

Billy is sorely tempted to get Steve in a headlock and mess up his hair until he caves, but although they’re friends now, they aren’t really the kind of friends who *touch* a lot, so he tampers down on the urge. Instead, he reaches for one of the kitchen cabinets – he’s pretty sure he still has some misshaped cookies from last Friday in a plastic container somewhere, ugly but edible – but he freezes at the sound of Max’s shriek of horror from the living room.

Billy doesn’t remember moving. All he knows is that he’s suddenly in the living room, jumping *over* the couch to get to Sam as fast as possible – worst case scenarios flashing in front of his eyes; Max has dropped Sam, Sam’s hit his head on the table, Sam’s bleeding, Sam’s not breathing, Sam’s *dead* –

– But Sam is *fine*. Of course he is. Fine, if a bit messy. Because he’s thrown up.

Max, on the other hand, is *not* fine. Because Sam threw up *on her*. There's an expression on her face as if she can't decide whether she's in shock or outraged. She's sitting frozen like a statue, holding Sam as far away from her as she can, with baby vomit all over her shirt.

Billy's been there. It happens all the time, especially if he bounces Sam a little too enthusiastically after he's eaten – which may have been the case here. He's sure he's worn that disgusted look on his face a lot of times.

But he's never seen it on anyone else. And to see it on Max ...

Well. It's fucking hilarious.

As the adrenaline leaves him, he snorts out a laugh. The sound makes Max look up, and she looks so betrayed that Billy can't stop the laugh that bubbles out of him. Her face morphs into solid outrage at that, which only makes him laugh harder. It doesn't help that Steve walks around the couch just then, takes a look at the mess and goes "Oh, ew, that's disgusting."

Billy takes Sam from Max's hands, because he's low-key worried that she's gonna throw him at Billy to shut him up, but he doesn't stop laughing. When Steve looks between Max and Billy and gives a little giggle, too, Billy can't help himself. He bends over and laughs until he's gasping for breath, startling Sam in his arms. Max looks at him as if he's grown a second head, right before she goes back to glaring.

"You're laughing at my misery!" she accuses, making Billy wheeze. He can't do more than nod in agreement as tears of mirth spring up in his eyes, because he can't get a single word out.

Steve's laughing now, too, although he's trying hard not to – which results in some half-choked noises that sets Billy off further. Billy's afraid to watch him, because if he does he'll never be able to draw breath, ever again.

"You guys suck," Max says, grumpily.

Billy laughs even harder at that and is suddenly thankful that he can't speak, because his first instinct had been to reply 'No, that's just me',

and he can't imagine that would have gone over well if he had to explain it.

Holding her soiled shirt out from her body, Max's face goes red. With anger or embarrassment, Billy doesn't know – but it makes his laughter recede a bit. He blinks the tears out of his eyes and promptly hands Sam over to Steve (who's biting his lip and watching Billy as if he's the best thing he's seen all day), before touching a hand to Max's shoulder.

“Come on, Max,” he snickers and nods to the bathroom. “I have a shirt you can borrow.”

She stands up and only hesitantly follows him as he detours to his own tiny bedroom first. This place doesn't have a closet, so he keeps all his clothes folded up in plastic crates lined up along the wall, and he digs around in one of them until he finds one that is a bit too small for him now, but that he kept because it was from his first concert. A band local to California that he's not into anymore, but he didn't want to throw it out, even though it's well-worn and has a hole under one arm.

Max may remember it – or at least appreciate that she's getting a band shirt instead of, like, a towel – because she pauses for a second before taking it from his outstretched hand.

When he points to the bathroom and tells her to soak the dirty shirt in the sink, she murmurs a “Thanks” before disappearing inside and locking the door.

He hears the water start running and returns to Steve, who's busy trying to wipe off Sam's face with a towel. Billy would wonder where he found it, but the truth is that this is hardly the first time Sam has thrown up unexpectedly, so Billy's taken to leave towels within grabbing distance of every place that he frequents in his apartment. He stole a bunch of old ones from Susan's linen closet before he moved out into the caravan, and cut each one up into four smaller pieces, so he has a lot of them now.

They're useful, even though they're fraying at the edges, but it does mean that he has to do laundry more often. Glancing over at the

growing pile on the chair by the door, he resolves to visit the laundromat soon.

Steve, when Billy turns his attention back to him, is simply watching him with an expression that makes Billy antsy.

“What?”

“That’s a good look on you.”

“What?” Billy says, again. He looks down on himself, expecting to see baby drool or puke or something on his own shirt. But it’s clean. “What do I look like?”

“Happy,” Steve says, shrugging. He focuses his attention on Sam right after, and therefore misses the way Billy’s head snaps up to stare at him. Completely misses Billy’s stricken look – something that Billy is grateful for. He feels suddenly vulnerable, and busies himself with stuffing the laundry down into four plastic bags in preparation for tomorrow. Also in case he needs an extra chair. There’s not really room for all three of them on the couch, after all, and while Steve is usually okay to sit on the floor, Max may not be. And she may not want to sit in the couch with him, either.

Perhaps it’s best if Billy sits on the chair, and lets the other two have the couch.

He returns to the kitchen for the leftover cookies – there are only four of them left and they are looking a bit stale, so he’s not exactly making the best impression here – and drops the whole container down on the makeshift table in front of the couch, where Steve has already made himself comfortable with Sam.

When Max emerges from the bathroom, she’s wearing Billy’s shirt and holding her own bunched up in one hand. Billy holds out his hand for it.

“Give that here, I’ll wash it tomorrow.”

“You don’t have a washing machine,” Max says.

Steve looks up at that. “You don’t have a washing machine?”

Billy snags the shirt from Max and stuffs it in with the rest of his laundry. “Dude, you’re here all the time. You know I don’t have a washing machine.”

“Then how do you do laundry?”

Billy levels him with a look that he hopes expresses how stupid that question is. “I go to the laundromat,” he says, enunciating the words as if Steve’s a bit slow. Which, honestly, he kind of is, right now. He turns to Max, “You can come pick it up whenever.”

Too late, he realizes two things. One, he just took for granted that she wants to come back. And two, he kind of just invited her back. Judging by the way her shoulders lose a little bit more tension, though, it was the right thing to say. She shrugs and says, “Whatever,” but he can tell that she’s pleased. And by the smile Steve’s sporting, so is he.

“Anyway,” Billy says, to distract them both. “There’s cookies on the table if you want some.”

It’s surprisingly easy after that. Max takes the chair, leaving Billy and Steve to share the couch. Billy reaches out for Sam, but Steve holds him out of reach and claims that now that he knows that Sam has just puked, it’s safe to hold him for a while and Steve wants some Sam-time. Conversation is a bit stilted between Billy and Max at first, but with Steve there to act as a buffer between them, it’s only a little awkward.

A while later, when Sam starts getting fussy, Steve hands him back to Billy with a smirk. “He wants his daddy.”

“No,” Billy says, because he can smell the real reason. “He wants a diaper change.”

Steve just smiles unapologetically and stands up, stretching. “Well either way, it’s late – for you at least – and I think that’s enough Sam-time for one day.” He turns to Max. “Are you ready to go?”

Scooting the chair back on the floor, she nods and gets up too, but then freezes in the middle of the movement. “Uh, what about the ...

you know.”

“Right!” Steve says and claps his hands together. Billy’s watching the two of them, not knowing what’s going on, and raises an eyebrow as Steve points to the door. “I’ll go get it.” He motions at both Max and Billy. “Wait here!” And then he’s out the door before either of them can react, leaving them alone.

“What was that about?” Billy asks.

“There’s, um. Mrs. Wheeler was gonna throw it out too because Mike’s little sister has grown too big for it, and you’re always carrying him around ...”

Billy’s lost. “Carrying who around? *Mike*?”

Max sighs and rolls her eyes as if *Billy* is the one who doesn’t make sense in this conversation. “No, you idiot, *Samuel*!” As soon as the words are out of her mouth, she pales. For a second, Billy wonders why, until he realizes that if she has called him an idiot six months ago, he would have made her pay for it. It sends a jolt of regret through him.

“Hey,” he says to distract her from it, and doesn’t move from his spot. Doesn’t raise his voice. “Are you gonna be okay to go home in that shirt?”

She swallows, and looks down at the T-shirt she’s currently wearing; faded black with a dark green and red logo on it – far from the yellow and pink striped shirt she’d had on when she came here. She knows what he’s asking. Will Susan or Neil give her shit for it when she gets home? Will they figure out that she’s been visiting him, and will they punish her for it?

Too casually, she lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “I’ll wear my jacket over it,” she says and reaches for her jacket that she threw over the back of the chair. She puts it on, and zips it up all the way. “I’ll change before they see it.”

That’s answer enough for Billy, and makes something like worry knot itself into a hard ball in his stomach. “Max.” He waits until she looks

up, and keeps eye contact when he asks, “Are you doing okay? At home?”

She doesn’t answer, which has alarms going off in Billy’s head. “Max. Has he done anything to you?”

“No,” she says, but his relief is short-lived when she tacks on, “Not *me*.”

Susan, then. Billy had thought that with him out of the picture, Neil would get back to playing perfect family with Susan and Max. Learning that he didn’t, Billy is hit by a sudden mixture of relief and grief. Relief, because maybe it wasn’t all on him after all – maybe it wasn’t Billy’s fault, or because Billy was a disappointment of a son. And grief, because maybe there was nothing he could have ever done to make his dad proud of him. Maybe it was a goal he could never have reached, no matter how he tried. Maybe his dad is just ... an asshole.

When he looks at the way Max is squirming, he’s struck by another feeling; pity. For her. He doesn’t understand it, because a part of him still wants to resent her for not sticking up for him even though she knew how he was treated in that house. But another part of him reasons that it’s unfair of him to have expected that from her; she’s just a kid, and Billy’s dad is a grown man. And if Billy couldn’t stand up to him, how could he expect a little girl to do it?

“I’m sorry,” he says, without knowing what he’s sorry for. How he treated her over the years, maybe. How things turned out between them because of it. Or how he left her in that house, even though there was no way he could have – or even wanted to – take her with him. Or how she has no choice but to live under the same roof as a man like Neil, just because her mother isn’t strong enough to leave him.

Or maybe just because Billy’s kid threw up on her shirt.

She frowns when she looks up at him, and he realizes that that may be the first freely-given apology he’s ever offered her. He finds that he’s sorry about that, too.

“Do you have a place to go, if you need to?” he asks. Again, she doesn’t have to ask what he means, or in what situation she would need somewhere to go. She just nods, and it doesn’t look like a lie. Billy reminds himself that she has friends who care about her, and that this is a small town. With the way everyone talk, it would spread like wildfire if Max got hurt at home.

He nods too, once, and that’s when Steve barges in through the door again, without knocking. He’s got a big smile on his face and is carrying –

“A *stroller*?”

It is, indeed, a stroller. It’s a bit worn, and has obviously belonged to a girl judging by the yellow and pink details, but it’s a stroller nonetheless. Billy looks between Max and Steve – Steve’s grinning and even Max has wiped the solemn look off her face in favor of a small smile. “I figured you didn’t have one,” she says. “Because you’re always carrying him around.”

Billy’s struck dumb, and swallows hard. He has thought about getting a stroller or a pram, if only to save his back since he’s always carrying Sam around in one way or the other, but he hasn’t found a reasonably priced one yet. He was hoping for a second-hand one, but hasn’t found one so far. And with winter and snow not so far away, he figured he’d just wait until spring. But the fact that Max was watching him from a distance just like he was watching her, and noticed that he may need one ... And then managed to get him one, without even knowing if he’d let her in ...

He clears his throat, swallows again. “Thank you.” Max and Steve are both looking at him, and he’s finding it hard to meet their eyes. Luckily, Sam picks this moment to let everyone know that he’d really appreciate a diaper change right about now, and lets out a loud scream while yanking at a lock of Billy’s hair, making him wince.

“That’s our cue to leave, I think,” Steve says and puts the stroller down by the door. He puts a hand on Max’s shoulder and steers her towards the door. “We’ll leave you to take care of ... that.”

“Hey!” Max says and punches him in the side, a little too hard to be

simply playful. "That's my nephew you're talking about."

And Billy feels like he's been punched in the gut with the way he can't breathe all of a sudden. He doesn't even feel the way Sam is tugging on his hair and only distantly hears him wailing in his ear.

Steve, who's watching him, falters. "You okay?"

Billy puts himself together in time for Max to turn around and watch him, too. "Yeah," he says, voice rough, before addressing Max. "You can bring the shirt back whenever, and I'll make sure yours is clean." And then he adds, just in case, "Or you can give it to Steve. Whatever."

Max glances at Steve. "I can bring it back, like, after school or something. Like, what time works?"

"Any time," Billy says, too fast by the way Steve's smile widens knowingly. "I mean. I'm usually at home if I'm not working, and you can always come by The Bakery if you want. But otherwise ... come by whenever."

He tries to sound casual about it, but he hopes that she hears what he's really saying, without him having to spell it out. He hopes that she knows that she has another place to go, if she needs to.

She nods, and he thinks that she probably got it.

They leave, finally, and Billy's left with a screaming baby and a new (or second-hand) stroller. He changes Sam's diaper in a daze, and fixes a bottle for him. When he sits down in the couch to feed him, he places himself with his back to the armrest, so he can see the rest of the room. The stroller by the door, and the chair that has been moved to stand next to the table instead of being laden with dirty laundry.

It makes something swell in his chest, and he bends down to murmur against Sam's hair, "That was your auntie Max, Sam. Do you remember her?" He smiles. "She'll remember *you*, at least, after you threw up on her. Maybe try not to do that again?"

Sam answers by smacking at the bottle, and Billy smiles as he adjusts the angle. "Yeah yeah."

11. Laundry interlude with Billy and Steve

Notes for the Chapter:

Second chapter for today (don't miss the last one!).
Enjoy!

That thing that Max said about Billy's lack of washing machine must have made Steve curious, because the next time Billy has laundry, he offers to go with him to the laundromat. Billy figures that Steve has probably never needed to visit a laundromat in his life, and he's proven correct when Steve, after putting the laundry into the machine and getting it started, taps a finger against the top of it and looks around expectantly.

"Now what?"

Billy sits down on the closest bench and picks Sam up from the baby harness so he can hold him in his lap instead, making sure he has his pacifier. "Now we wait."

"For what?" Steve's still standing. Slowly, Billy raises his eyebrows and points at the washing machine in front of him, where a washing cycle has just begun.

Steve frowns. "What, really?" He sits down next to Billy. "You just sit here and wait for it to finish?"

"Yup."

"Doesn't that take, like hours?"

"... yup."

Steve is looking at him like he's crazy. "And you don't go and do other things, while it's running? I don't know, grocery shopping or the gas station or, hell, even go home for a bit?"

"Nope."

"Why?"

“Because I don’t want anyone to steal my clothes, Steve,” Billy says, and somehow manages to sound patient about it. “Or my machine.”

Steve looks floored. “They steal *machines*?”

It makes Billy laugh, and he gives Steve a little push with his elbow. “It’s not like they grab the machine and run, you idiot! But they could take out my clothes and put theirs in, and then I’d have to pay for another machine when I got back. It’s not worth it.”

Steve looks like he really *really* wants to comment on that, but bites his bottom lip and stays quiet. At least until, “So, what do you usually do when you’re here?”

By now, Steve has seen the pile of books Billy keeps in his apartment, and knows that the librarians at Hawkins Public Library knows Billy by name. So it’s less embarrassing than it would have been a couple of months back, to admit, “I bring a book or something. Or just play with Sam and pray that he doesn’t start screaming.”

“What do you do if he does? If he starts screaming, I mean.”

“I don’t know, try to make him *stop*, I guess.”

They sit there in relative quiet for a while. It’s not uncomfortable or anything; they don’t always have to talk and Sam seems to be content just sitting around this time. He usually likes being here; he gets distracted by the laundry going round and round, and the sound the machines make seem to be soothing for him. Billy hasn’t brought a book this time, because he figured he’d have Steve there to entertain him.

But Steve’s sitting quiet. Staring at the machine with more intensity than Sam, even, and looking like he’s deep in thought. Just to mess with him, Billy snaps his fingers next to his ear, making him flinch and then scowl. “Asshole.”

“You know it,” Billy grins.

“Hey, so,” Steve says, apropos of nothing. “I have a washer and a dryer at home.”

“No shit,” Billy deadpans. “I never would have guessed, from your obvious experience with laundromats.”

“Shut up,” Steve says, looking a little pink. “What I *mean* is, that you could just bring your stuff over to my place if my parents aren’t home. And you could do laundry there.” He shrugs, a little helplessly. “I mean, at least that way we could watch TV or something while we wait.” He motions to the sparsely populated laundromat around them. “It would beat *this*, at least.”

It would. It really would. Plus, despite how much time they’ve been spending together lately, Billy has actually never been at Steve’s place before. He’s curious to see it. So he accepts.

That weekend, Steve picks Billy and Sam up in his BMW, which is more spacious than the Camaro – especially since Steve insisted on bringing the stroller too, so Billy could get Sam used to it. Billy’s been walking around with it in his apartment, but Sam’s still a little too small for it and he hasn’t wanted to use it outside yet.

“Bring it!” Steve said when Billy mentioned it. “My place is bigger, you can walk around all of downstairs.”

And yeah, Steve’s place is bigger. *Much* bigger. Billy knew that he was well-off but he mentally upgrades that to just plain ‘rich’. When they walk inside, Billy carrying Sam and the bags of dirty laundry and Steve carrying the stroller and a bag of a couple of Sam’s things, Billy stops dead in the hallway and looks around. He can see into the living room from here; it’s huge – could probably fit all of Billy’s apartment inside it, with room to spare – and tastefully decorated in a way that only people with money can afford.

“You’ve been holding out on me,” is the first thing he says when he turns around and looks at Steve.

Steve looks a bit embarrassed, and doesn’t meet his eyes. “I don’t ... what do you mean?”

“I mean,” Billy says and kicks off his shoes, because it doesn’t seem

right to walk out onto the pristine floors in his old Converse, “That all this time we’ve been hanging out at my shitty apartment when you’ve been living in a mansion like this!”

He regrets it as soon as the words are out, because Steve looks down at his feet as if he’s suddenly uncomfortable. And Billy bites his lip, because this is a *nice* neighborhood. People here probably listen to gossip, and if Steve’s neighbors found out that he was hanging out with Billy Hargrove ... well, it wouldn’t reflect well on him. His parents won’t like it – which is probably why Steve made sure to invite him over when they aren’t home. It makes sense.

Steve’s just being nice. Letting him use the washing machine. They haven’t been friends for very long, after all. Billy shouldn’t have said that. Shouldn’t have made it sound as if he should have been invited sooner.

“I mean,” he adds, lamely. “Never mind. I get it.”

Steve looks up, with the kind of bewildered look on his face that makes him look like a confused puppy. It is, regrettably, adorable. “What?”

Deciding to not think about it anymore, Billy plasters a smile onto his face. “Which way to the laundry, then?”

Steve shows him to a pristine laundry room at the back of the house, where they put the laundry in and start the machine. After that, Billy gets a tour of the rest of the house. Steve acts like a real tour guide and points out all the different rooms to Sam as if they’re sights. Sam doesn’t give a shit, of course, but Billy appreciates the effort.

“And here’s the kitchen, where we’ll warm a bottle for you later. The bathroom, where your daddy will get to change your diaper in a bit, I bet. My father’s office.” Steve points through an open door into a room full of bookshelves with a large desk in the middle, before moving on. “And here’s the living room, with a couch that mom imported from Italy – she might actually strangle me if you puke on it, Sammy, but don’t let that stop you, people have puked on it before and she hasn’t noticed yet ... let’s just say that that pillow in the corner is there for a reason, and leave it at that.”

It's entertaining, to listen to Steve ramble, and Billy finds himself genuinely smiling as they move to the second floor.

"This is the guest room," Steve says, showing a moderately sized room with a bed and a dresser and a desk with a chair, set up like a hotel room. "This is my parents' bedroom." A quick glance reveals a sparsely decorated room with a big bed and a whole wall of closets. "The bathroom."

Billy actually stops on the threshold to the bathroom, because the bathroom contains a bathtub. And not the tiny kind like the one they had at the house on Cherry Lane – no, this one is huge. Billy would bet that if he were to lie down in it, he could lie comfortable on the bottom without having to bend his knees. He didn't know they *made* bathtubs that big.

He says as much, when Steve backtracks to see what caught his eye.

"Yeah," Steve laughs. "It's pretty nice, I guess."

Billy, who only has a shower with bad water pressure in his apartment, raises an eyebrow. "Pretty nice?" But he supposes that someone with a pool – because yeah, he saw that through the window – isn't too impressed with a bathtub, even one that you could probably fit like three people in.

They move on to the last door, which Steve opens with a flourish. "And this is my room." He walks inside and flops onto the bed, while Billy follows and takes note of everything around him.

The wallpaper is atrocious, but the room is spacious and clean and has a big bed with sheets that are probably worth more than all Billy's textiles combined – including his clothes. The room itself is nice, if a little impersonal. And definitely neater than Billy had expected from Steve – who regularly leaves stuff out on the counters when he's over at Billy's place, and throws his jacket onto whatever surface is available.

When he voices this, Steve suddenly gets very interested in his fingernails. "Uh, well my mom has a lady coming over once a week to clean." He's blushing, as if he's embarrassed. Billy thinks about his

messy, tiny apartment, and how he only cleans up half-heartedly once in a while, and feels a bit embarrassed too.

“I mean,” he says, walking over to the window and checking out the view. “That’s good. It would probably take a whole day to clean, otherwise. It’s so big.” The window faces the pool – which is covered up now, as it’s too cold to swim. Too bad. Billy misses swimming.

“Yeah,” Steve says and stands back up. “Too big for one person.”

“One person?”

“My parents aren’t around a lot,” Steve says, and turns his back, walking out of the room. “Hey, do you wanna watch some TV or something while we wait? I have movies, too.”

“Uh, sure,” Billy says, a little thrown off at the sudden change of topic, before following him.

But it makes him think. The place is big, for sure, but Steve’s right – it’s way too big for one person. He can’t imagine living in a place like this, on his own, or even with Sam. Too much space, too many rooms, too many windows. He’s felt plenty lonely in his life, but he imagines it would feel even worse in a place like this, that looks like a hotel where a stranger comes in once a week to see to it that it’s kept all prim and proper.

At least the mess in his own apartment makes it seem lived-in. Because it *is*. He glances at Steve as they make their way downstairs, taking note of the lack of photographs on the walls, or any personal touches outside of Steve’s room. And he thinks that maybe he can understand why Steve hasn’t invited him here, before. Why he seems so happy to just spend time at Billy’s place, shitty as it is.

“You look deep in thought,” Steve says when they get downstairs. “What are you thinking?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh, so the usual then.”

Billy shoulder-checks him into a wall playfully and throws him the

finger with the hand that's steadying Sam, and is rewarded with Steve's laugh.

They end up spending most of the afternoon talking and playing with Sam. They figure out that while the stroller is a bit too big for Sam right now, he can sit in it for longer periods of time if they prop him up with a towel or a blanket. They also figure out that Sam is less than pleased with the stroller at first, but once Steve has walked him to and from the kitchen about ten times, he seems to be warming up to it and happily kicks his legs around.

Around lunchtime, they heat up a couple of frozen dinners in the oven. While the food warms, Billy feeds Sam a mashed-up banana. Dolly told him that he could probably start introducing solid food now, and Billy's been experimenting with mashed up fruits and some porridge. So far, Sam's favorite has been the banana, so that's what he goes for now, too.

When the food is done and Sam is content with a full belly and a clean diaper, Billy and Steve take their lunch back into the living room and sits on either end of the couch, with the TV droning on in the background while they talk. It's nice to have some kind of background noise, but there's nothing on that catches their interest, and Billy can't say that he's missed having a TV. Back at Cherry, he usually put on MTV when he was working out or when he was home alone – never when his dad was home. Neil was more of a News and Sports kinda man, and Billy wasn't terribly interested in either of those. And after Sam, well. Billy never really had the time for it.

When the laundry is done, Billy half expects Steve to pack up the wet clothes in their respective plastic bags and drive Billy home – he can hang it up at his apartment to dry, after all – but Steve says “Don't be stupid” with a look as if Billy suggested something outrageous, and throws most of it into the dryer. A few things that would need extra care, like a couple of Billy's shirts, he puts on hangers and brings them into the bathroom to hang them on the rod holding the shower curtain.

Billy feels bad. He hasn't done anything fancier to those shirts than

throw them in the dryer at the laundromat, with the rest of it, because he hasn't had the patience for anything else.

Sam falls asleep in the afternoon, on a soft fuzzy blanket on the Harringtons' couch.

"How long does he usually sleep for?" Steve asks, while crouching down so he can peer at Sam's sleeping face. Billy doesn't blame him – Sam is adorable when he sleeps.

Not that Sam's not adorable when he's awake – he is. At least when he's not puking. Or shitting. Or, well, anything that involves bodily fluids.

"Best case scenario? A couple of hours."

"And *worst* case scenario?"

"Seventeen minutes."

Steve laughs. "That's a very specific number. Why do I get the feeling that you timed it?"

"Because I did," Billy answers solemnly. "Just enough time to do the dishes and take a quick shower."

That elicits another laugh from Steve, and Billy feels a smile tug at his own lips in response.

"Well then," Steve says. "We had TV dinners, so there's barely any dishes. And you have me to babysit this time! So I bet you can squeeze in a shower, if you want." And at Billy's uncomprehending look, he lifts one shoulder in a casual shrug, with a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Or a bath."

He says it as if he *knows* how tempting that is. He probably *does* know; Billy wasn't exactly subtle when Steve gave him the tour – he was basically salivating when he saw that bathtub in the upstairs bathroom. It was so *big*. It would fit all of Billy. He'd be able to lie down in it, and disappear completely under the surface – just close his eyes and hear nothing but his own heart beat for as long as he could hold his breath.

It's tempting. *So* tempting. But Billy's a guest, and he's just here to do laundry, and besides –

“– I have to watch Sam.”

Steve actually snorts at that, and motions at the sleeping baby on the couch. “He's asleep. How hard can it be to watch him when he's asleep?”

“What if he wakes up?” Billy says, dumbly.

Looking at Billy as if he's stupid – and honestly, *fair* – Steve answers, slowly; “Then I'll pick him up.”

“What if he cries?” Because at this point, Billy might actually *want* Steve to convince him.

“Then I'll rock him a bit, maybe sing to him? See if he wants something to eat maybe.” He ticks the suggestions off on his fingers and levels Billy with a look. “I've been watching you with him for a while now, I know what to do. And besides, I've watched him before, if you remember.”

Billy remembers; when he was sick and Steve let him sleep.

“What if he needs a changed diaper?”

He laughs when Steve grimaces. “Then I'll come and pull you out of the bath myself, I promise.” The grimace is mostly for show, Billy finds, as it melts away and turns into a smile. “I saw you eyeing that tub, before. You know you want to.”

Billy *does*, but –

“A bit shitty of me to leave you on babysitting duty in your own home, isn't it?”

“You know,” Steve says and pulls himself up to his full height – and uses the one inch he's got on Billy to look down at him, raising a challenging eyebrow, “It sounds to me as if you don't trust me with Sammy, here.”

“That’s not true, you know I do.”

“I don’t know. I don’t feel the *trust*, Hargrove.”

Oh, back to last names, huh? Low blow. But Billy can’t even be angry about it, because Steve’s grinning so confidently. He knows he’s won.

“There’s, like, bath foam and salts and stuff in the cabinet on the wall. Use whatever you want. I’ll bring you a towel.”

The bathtub is *heavenly*. The water at Steve’s house gets hotter than the water in Billy’s apartment, and the cabinet, which Billy checks out only because he’s curious, is full of different kinds of soaps and bath salts. Most of the bottles and jars are pushed to the back of the shelf, but some things are closer to the edge and look more like they’re being used. Shampoo, conditioner, soap, a hairbrush in a basket – and a can of Farrah Fawcett hairspray. Billy files away that knowledge for later – he could use some blackmail material on Steve, considering what kind of stuff Steve’s got on him already – but in the end he closes the cabinet without using any of the products.

He just wants the water.

The tub fills quickly, and the water is almost scalding when he steps in. It’s *wonderful*. He lies down while the tub is filling up, and closes his eyes; feels the water slowly rise over his body while the rush of the water fills his ears like white noise. Breath by breath, he finds himself relaxing. He hadn’t even realized how tense he was; how tense he must have been this *whole time*, until it suddenly bleeds out of him, leaving him boneless.

When there’s water to his chin – and covering his *knees*, even – he reluctantly shuts the water off. In the sudden silence, all he can hear is the water sloshing around him when he moves, and his own breaths. He’s sweaty at the temples, and already drifting, half-asleep.

Man. He’s gonna drown himself in here, if he falls asleep for real. Embarrassing ... but what a way to go.

There’s a timid knock on the door, and Steve’s voice drifts in through

the wood.

“Are you in the bath?”

“M-hm,” Billy says, not even reflecting over the question.

The door opens, and Steve walks in, holding a folded-up towel – and stops dead in the middle of the bathroom, just staring. Billy watches as his face reddens and he hurriedly looks away.

“Oh!” he says, staring into the corner of the room where there’s nothing more interesting than a laundry basket. “I, uh, I expected there to be bubbles.”

Not until then does Billy realize that he’s *naked* in the tub, and the water hides *nothing*, and oh, Steve just walked in on him naked and –

– and Billy really should feel worse about that than he does. But he’s more relaxed than he remembers being, *ever*, so he doesn’t really care.

After all, Steve’s walked in on him doing worse things than taking a bath.

But Steve *does* look pretty uncomfortable, so Billy lazily covers up his dick with one hand and sits up, leaning against the side of the tub, sighing wistfully as he has to leave the water, if only a little. “You can look now,” he says, not without a chuckle.

If anything Steve’s face gets even redder at that. “I wasn’t looking! I was just ...” He flounders, and then seems to remember that he’s still holding the towel. “Brought you a towel.”

“Thanks,” Billy says, and watches as Steve puts the towel on the closed toilet seat. And then, because he doesn’t really know what to say (and because bringing up the last time Steve walked in on Billy with a dick out – not necessarily his own – doesn’t seem like the best move), he continues, “Everything okay with Sam?”

It has the desired effect in that it replaces some of the embarrassment on Steve’s face with *exasperation*. “Dude, it’s been, like, twenty minutes. He’s still asleep on the couch.”

“What if he rolls off it?” Billy asks, just to be a dick, and gets to watch the red drain away from Steve’s face.

“What? Can he *do* that?”

Sam has only just started to roll over, from lying on his back to lying on his stomach, and he hasn’t yet done it in his sleep. Billy has just opened his mouth to say this, when Steve says, “I’m gonna go check on him, actually.” Then he turns and leaves, but not without pointing a pair of *fingerguns* at Billy, and saying, “Enjoy your bath.”

And as the door closes behind him with a soft click, Billy sinks back into the hot water – smiling, and determined to do just that; enjoy his bath, that is. He dips his head underwater, and pulls his hands through his hair before breaking the surface. He slicks his hair back, leans his head on the edge of the tub, and closes his eyes.

Despite his resolve to not fall asleep, his eyes close as of their own volition.

He dozes.

Not for very long, because the water is still pleasantly warm when he opens his eyes again. But now there’s music drifting in through the door, coming from downstairs. And not just any music – that’s *Metallica*. He’d recognize those riffs anywhere, even though the music isn’t loud and he can barely hear it from here.

He’s warm to the *bone*, his limbs feel like rubber and he *really* doesn’t want to get up, but he’s curious. Steve doesn’t seem like a Metallica kinda guy – in fact, Steve’s made sure to tell Billy, on several occasions, why Metallica should not be considered music. So why is Billy hearing Metallica, in Steve’s house?

With great reluctance, he pulls the plug of the tub and steps out. While the water drains, he towels off – with the softest towel he has ever used, *Jesus Christ* – and dresses. He dries his hair with the towel and considers borrowing the brush he saw (and maybe some hairspray, even though it’s the girly kind), but in the end he just pulls a hand through his damp curls a couple of times, untangling the tresses. They make the top of his T-shirt wet, but he knows it’ll dry

soon enough. Besides, he doesn't see a hair dryer.

He can hear the music better when he opens the door, and walks downstairs. He's not walking on his tiptoes, exactly, but he's not trying to make noise either, so when he gets downstairs, Steve doesn't notice him at first.

And Steve is ... dancing.

He's holding Sam – one arm under his bum, one hand on his back – and he's swaying back and forth, not really to the beat of the music at all. (To be fair, this particular song may not be suited for dancing, especially with a baby who's too young to headbang.) Steve is also, probably in an effort to keep his movements smooth enough to be comfortable for Sam, moving his hips. With his back to Billy, he's effectively wiggling his butt, and Billy can't look away.

At first, he wishes for a camera, because this is prime blackmail material, better than any brand of hairspray. But then he hears Steve's voice mixing in with the lyrics, and his heart clenches. Steve's singing along, and dancing with Sam – *dancing*, with *Billy's son* in his arms – and Billy suddenly can't breathe for the lump in his throat.

It feels big, somehow. This moment, which wasn't meant for his eyes. To see Steve interact with Sam without knowing he's being watched, and being so careful with him. So loving.

It makes Billy's heart ache. His chest feels too small, his throat too narrow. His skin itches with the need to do something, say something; *move*.

And in that moment, Steve swings around. He's in the middle of a word when he catches sight of Billy, and freezes, his mouth forming an 'o'.

Billy swallows. And he can't just stand there, staring, because that's just creepy. So he forces himself to smile, and say, "Teaching him your moves already, Steve?"

Sam gurgles and hits Steve on the arm with a tiny fist, probably upset that the dancing stopped. Steve smiles at that and straightens up, and

walks over to Billy. “Yeah well,” he says, “you’re never too young to learn how to dance. The ladies *love* a man who can dance.” Before Billy has time to figure out if that’s a dig at how Billy himself is, obviously, not into ladies, Steve hurries to add, “I mean, some *guys* are probably into it as well. If that’s gonna be Sammy’s ... thing.”

And oh, it’s awkward, but at the same time something warm blooms in Billy’s chest. He’s known for a long time that Steve didn’t have a problem with ... well. *Billy*. Because he walked in on him sucking a guy’s dick, and if that *had* been a problem, that would have been deterrent number one, right? But to hear it out loud is ... something else. Especially while he’s holding Sam and looking all soft like that.

To distract himself – and Steve, in case he notices – from the sudden butterflies in his stomach, Billy reaches out his hands and takes Sam from Steve, settling him against his side. “You call that dancing?”

Steve’s eyes dart up to his. “Fuck you, I’m a great dancer!”

“Sure you are.”

“I am!” Steve lifts a challenging eyebrow. “I just need something better than this noise to dance to.”

“I was wondering about that ...” Billy matches his raised eyebrow. “Metallica? Do you have a secret stash with *good music* lying around somewhere?”

At that, Steve lets out a laugh, and grins. “Well, I didn’t dare introduce Sammy to non-Billy-approved music – even if his daddy’s taste in music *sucks*.”

“You listen to fucking *Wham!*, Steve, you don’t have any place to talk.”

“Hey, they’re at the top of the charts for a reason ...”

They continued their old argument while Sam is on the blanket on the floor, contentedly leaning on his arms and rocking back and forth in a precursor to crawling.

Not until later, when Billy’s hair has almost dried completely and it’s

getting dark outside, does Steve offer to drive them home. And even then, it's just because Billy didn't brought enough diapers.

Billy falls asleep later that night with a smile on his face, no longer worried that Steve doesn't want him around.

Notes for the Chapter:

This is a very self-indulgent story. I want that boy to get a nice bath, so a nice bath he shall have.

12. Billy and Steve and Sam

It's strange, how easy it is to slip into this new routine that involves Steve. Before, it's been only Billy and Sam, with Billy's daily routine being along the lines of waking up, going to work, work, going home, do chores, take care of the baby and go to sleep. Rinse and repeat. Now, it's still those things, only with Steve added to the mix, almost daily.

Steve shows up at work before his shift at Scoops. Steve is often at the mall when he does deliveries. Steve comes along when he goes to buy groceries, Steve shows up with dinner in the afternoon, Steve watches Sam for a bit while Billy runs out for an errand or indulges in a longer shower than usual.

Steve, Steve, Steve.

Billy still worries about it, a bit, sometimes when he's low on sleep. Because Steve has no *real* reason to hang around – Billy's often tired and not the best company, he's got a baby that he can't really leave unattended, and he can never afford to do things just for fun. He doesn't own a TV, so the most they can do at his house is listen to the radio – and he doesn't have a phone, so Steve can't just call ahead. Why would Steve want to keep hanging around him, when all of those things say that he shouldn't?

But the thing is ... The thing is that Steve doesn't seem to mind any of that. He'll just show up at Billy's if he wants something, never mentioning that Billy should get a phone, and he never indicates that he's bored or that he doesn't want to be there. Quite the opposite, in fact. His face lights up every time he sees Sam, and he often steals him right out of Billy's arms nowadays. Billy always lets him – he's rendered helpless every time Steve turns that brilliant smile his way, and besides, he knows that Sam is safe with Steve.

The routines change a bit with time, too. For one thing, Steve starts staying for longer in the evenings.

The first time Steve stays over, is a Tuesday in the middle of October. It's half past six, and usually Steve leaves around that time so that

Billy can get ready for bed; Billy's used to waking up at two am every night, but it's getting harder to get Sam to go to sleep in the evenings, especially since he sleeps while Billy works, as well as napping during the day. Billy, unfortunately, doesn't have that luxury, and sometimes Sam keeps him up for hours, making Billy a sleep-deprived zombie at work the next day.

He knows that it'll be a long night now, because Sam is on the floor, making happy noises and rocking his upper body – to the point that he's basically crawling *backwards* until his bum hits the back of the couch – and when Steve pulls his jacket on to leave, Billy says, “Did you drive here?”

He knows the answer – it's cold outside and they're too far away for Steve to have walked – but waits until Steve nods anyway. “Wait up, I'll follow you to your car.”

Steve seems to be happy to wait while Billy dresses Sam in warmer clothes – he's got a little beanie on with a turtle on the front, and it's a little too big and *adorable* – and then pulls a sweatshirt over his own head before getting into his jean jacket. He forgoes the baby carrier, and instead hefts Sam onto his arm while he grabs his keys.

“You're awfully well-dressed just to follow me to my car,” Steve says and raises one eyebrow. “Or, well. Well-dressed for *you*, at least.”

They walk downstairs together, shoulders touching in the narrow stairwell. “I'm gonna take him on a walk,” Billy says and nods at Sam, who's staring at Steve with big eyes and not looking even close to sleepy. “I hope it'll tire him out a bit, so he'll fall asleep.”

“Oh,” is Steve's reply, before he lights up. “Want some company?”

And Billy can't say no to that.

They walk around the neighborhood – a longer route than Billy would have taken if he'd been alone – and they take their time. It's chilly, and the sun is setting behind grey clouds, making it darker. The leaves on the trees are orange and yellow and falling, one by one, from the branches. Steve picks up a pretty red leaf from the ground and whirls it in front of Sam as they walk. It distracts Sam for

a while, and Billy pays enough attention to make sure he doesn't put it in his mouth. But other than that, his attention is on Steve.

Steve, who's walking next to him as if he hasn't got a care in the world, his cheeks and nose red from the chilly wind. Who could have gone home, but decided to go on a walk with Billy instead. Who is now pointing out a building while telling a story about how him and Tommy H once threw rotten fruit on the windows on the second floor, because there was an old lady living there who used to yell at them for playing too loudly in the park when they were kids.

"And then," Steve says, snickering, "she came right up to Tommy from behind – because she wasn't in her apartment, she'd been at the store or something, and she just dropped her bags and walked up to us and grabbed Tommy by the ear! His *face*, man!"

Billy listens, and asks the occasional question, and laughs when Steve continues his retelling of the events. They talk and walk, and Sam doesn't show a single sign of getting sleepier. By the time they admit defeat and turn back around, Billy's arms are tired. Maybe it shows from how he changes his grip and stretches, but Steve immediately holds out his arms for Sam.

"You sure?" Billy asks. "He's getting heavy."

Steve just rolls his eyes. "Give him here, Hargrove. You get enough time with him already. Don't be greedy."

"He's *my* kid," Billy grumbles, but doesn't mind in the least when Steve takes Sam and bounces him a little up and down.

"Yeah, well. Learn to share."

And it might be cold outside, but Billy's warming up from the inside when he looks at his son in the arms of his ... friend. Best friend. *Only* friend?

Steve.

When they get back to the apartment, Billy holds out his arms for Sam again, but Steve pretends not to see it. "He doesn't look tired," he says, without the slightest hint that he plans on giving him back

any time soon.

“Probably because he slept late this morning,” Billy says, rubbing at his eyes with the palm of his hands, because he’s tired. “And napped for a couple of hours after lunch.”

“How will you make him go to sleep then?” Steve asks.

“I won’t, probably,” Billy answers truthfully. “I’ll just ... stay up until he gets tired, I guess.”

“Don’t you have to get up at, like, two?” It’s like the tenth time he’s asked that in the last couple of months, and Billy’s answer has always been the same.

This time he just groans. “Don’t remind me ...”

“Hey, what if I ...” Steve starts, and then trails off. Bites his lip.

“What?”

“I could babysit?” Steve says, and when Billy’s eyebrows furrows in confusion, he hurries to add, “I mean, I could stay up with him until he gets tired, and you could go to sleep.”

“What? No. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m serious! I work the late shift tomorrow so I don’t have to get up until ten anyway, I could stay until he fell asleep and then go home, and still get my eight hours.”

Eight hours of sleep. Billy doesn’t even remember what eight hours of sleep even *feels* like.

He glances at his watch. It’s almost eight – they were walking for a long time. Sam’s wide awake, and it’s unlikely that Billy on his own will be able to get him to sleep before nine. Ten is more likely. That means four hours of sleep, if Sam doesn’t wake him up in the night.

Four hours is not a lot.

And Billy would be lying if the thought of Steve sticking around for a

bit longer wasn't appealing. But –

“No.” Steve's face falls, and he covers it up with an exaggerated pout. Billy reaches out for Sam again. “Thanks for offering, but I can't ask that of you.”

“Oh!” Steve grins again, and ignores Billy's outstretched arms in favor of turning his back and walking back into Billy's building. “Good thing you're not asking, then.” And he leaves Billy there, but looks over his shoulder with a raised eyebrow. “Are you coming?”

And, like, this isn't something that people *do*, is it? Offering something so selfless for another person, without wanting something in return. And Billy from a couple of weeks ago would have definitely thought that Steve would want something in return – because what teenage in his right mind would offer to babysit another teenager's *literal* baby, just so said teenager could get some more sleep? – but he knows better now. Steve doesn't want anything from him. Steve knows that he's got nothing to offer (and the only thing he *had* to offer, Steve had made pretty clear that he didn't want), and he's still here. Still offering to help.

But also, despite how tempting it is to accept, Billy's pride means that he can't.

“Steve. Seriously, thanks but you don't have to do that.”

“I know. I want to.”

“You want to?”

“Yeah.”

“You *want* to stay awake with a possibly crying baby until he falls asleep out of exhaustion, in my shitty apartment, while I sleep?”

“Yep.”

“Somehow I seriously doubt that.”

They're back inside the apartment now, and Billy watches as Steve kicks off his shoes and goes to plop down in the couch, still wearing

his jacket and not letting go of Sam – who’s not complaining, instead happily grabbing Steve by his face and smacking his ear with a tiny fist in excitement.

“Ow,” Steve says, and turns his head to look at Billy, who’s still standing by the door. His face goes somber. “Listen. Don’t you trust me with Sam?” And his voice is teasing, but there’s something insecure in the way he looks, as if he honestly believes that Billy doesn’t trust him, which ... couldn’t be farther from the truth.

Billy scrambles to reassure him, stumbling over his words in his haste to get them out. “I – Of course I do!”

Steve smiles sweetly, as if he knows he’s won. “Okay then. Good night.”

Dammit.

Billy does not fold right away – he’s not that much of a pushover – but seeing Steve in Billy’s couch, holding Billy’s son, and offering to help ... it makes something feel simultaneously tight and light in his chest. In the end, he decides not to fight it. Why look a gift horse in the mouth?

“Fine!” he says and stomps into the kitchen. He digs through a kitchen drawer for the spare key, which he stalks over to Steve and puts in his outstretched hand. It’s tempting to say something else – a litany of instructions, maybe; like how Sam likes to be rocked as he falls asleep, or how Sam sleeps in a nest of blankets in Billy’s bed, still, or that he usually doesn’t eat fruit this late in the evening, or how there are clean bottles in the second cupboard – but he clamps down on all of it. If Steve needs anything, Billy’s only gonna be in the next room over. Steve can damn well come and get him if he needs to.

“Wake me up if you guys need anything,” is what he settles on.

Then he takes refuge in the bathroom, under the guise of getting ready for bed.

It’s *weird*, to do so with someone else in the apartment (Sam doesn’t

count). It feels *more than weird* when he gets back out in the living room and realizes that he won't bring Sam into the bedroom with him. For a second, his heart clenches painfully and he considers calling it off and telling Steve go to home. But then Steve turns around and smiles, and props Sam up on the top of the couch cushion and takes his little hand in his, waving it around a little. "Good night, daddy'," he says in a high voice that's probably supposed to be his impression of Sam.

It makes Billy snort, but also helps lessen his doubt. He tells himself that he's just gonna be in the next room. He'll wake up if they need him. He can be out here in no time. Steve won't let anything happen to Sam. Steve will be here.

He grabs Sam's little face between his hands and kisses the top of his head. "G'night, Sam." And then he straightens up. Steve pouts a little. "What, no kiss for me?" And, like, Billy *knows* it's a joke – they're friends, and this is the kind of friendly ribbing that they apparently do now – but a part of him considers just leaning down and pressing his lips to Steve's head, too. The urge is *strong*.

But of course he doesn't. What he *does* do, is turn on his heel and flip Steve off over his shoulder as he escapes into the bedroom, and closes the door behind him. Not all the way, though. He keeps it slightly ajar, so he'll be able to see the light from the living room filtering in, as well as hear the sounds of Steve's voice murmuring to Sam, and Sam's occasional nonsensical answer.

He doesn't think that he'll be able to fall asleep without Sam in his sight and with someone else in the apartment, but figures that he'll try to close his eyes for a bit, at least. Get some extra rest.

He doesn't even remember closing his eyes.

He wakes up when his alarm goes off, at two am like every weekday, and his first instinct is – as always – to check on Sam, so he reaches out for his corner of the bed ...

And his heart skips a beat when *Sam isn't there*, and he's halfway out

of the bed in a panic before he remembers yesterday. He realizes several things at once:

Sam is most likely *fine*. He's with Steve.

It's two o'clock am, and Billy's slept uninterrupted since after eight. That makes almost six hours. It's the longest sleep he's gotten since the spring.

And if Billy slept through the night, and Steve didn't sneak in here to deposit Sam in his bed, then ...

... then Steve hasn't left yet.

Billy walks out into the living room, and the tiny smidge of worry in his chest is extinguished as he lays his eyes on the scene. A scene he can clearly see, since the lights are still on.

Steve has, in fact, not left yet. He's lying on the couch – on Billy's lumpy, uncomfortable couch – with his head on his rolled-up jacket and his feet wedged in between the cushions and the armrest. He's turned slightly to face the back of the couch, snoring softly.

And on his chest lies Sam. He's on his belly, sprawled like a starfish, cheek smushed against Steve's sweater, a little pool of drool darkening the fabric under him.

Billy's eyes tear up without him understanding why, and he has to blink to clear his sight. He's had Sam on his *own* chest countless times – it seems that he falls asleep faster like that, and sleeps easier, even if the same cannot be said about Billy – but there's something very special in seeing him there with Steve, both of them sound asleep.

Both of Billy's favorite boys.

The thought pops up unbidden in his mind, and the truth with which it resonates within scares him. But it's true, isn't it? Sam is Billy's priority, his number one, has etched his way onto Billy's heart and will stay there forever – but Steve's important too. Has grown to be important.

Because they're friends. *Good* friends. Steve helps a lot and he seems

to care and ... and Billy cares about him, in turn. Of course he does. He doesn't have an abundance of friends these days – it's only natural that he cares about the ones he's got, right?

Right.

He gets ready for work in somewhat of a daze, leaving Sam and Steve on the couch without waking either one of them. When it's time to leave, he gently lifts Sam off of Steve and puts him in the baby carrier, but not without holding him close for a moment and just breathing him in.

Somehow, the six hours apart, during which Billy *slept*, was enough for Billy to start *missing* him. The teenager bad boy part of his brain *knows* that he's being ridiculous – but the young father part of him doesn't give a shit.

Breathing Sam in means that Billy's made aware of that Sam needs a diaper change, but there's no way he's going to wake him up for that, so instead he bundles him up in the baby carrier and tucks a blanket around him. He brings a bag of clothes and diapers and other stuff he may need, to work.

When he's about to go, he faces a conundrum. He *should* wake Steve up, so that he can drive home and sleep in his own bed. Billy's standing behind the couch, hand outstretched and hovering over Steve's shoulder.

But.

Billy's never seen him sleep before. He looks so relaxed. As Billy watches, Steve stretches his body. One of his arms go over his head and ends up dangling off the couch, while he scratches his stomach with the other. But he doesn't wake up.

Without meaning to, Billy finds himself leaning on the back of the couch, chin resting on his arm. They're close, like this. Close enough that Billy can let his eyes roam all over Steve's face. Pale skin, dark moles, a full head of sleep-mussed hair –

A couple of strands has fallen over his face, and unthinkingly, Billy

reaches out to brush them away. The hair is soft, with whatever products Steve has been using not strong enough to last through a night of sleep. Fascinated, Billy lets his fingers card through dark brown strands – at least until Steve lets out a contented little hum, at which point Billy yanks his hand back guiltily.

Because friends may help each other out and rib each other, but friends do *not* gently brush away their friend's hair from their face as they're sleeping. Billy's actually pretty sure that all friends he's had so far would clock him one, if they caught him doing something like that. And Billy may be gay; may be way more into brushing a dude's hair out of his face than a girl's ... but he's not gonna do anything to jeopardize his friendship with Steve.

Antsy over what he did, and not wanting to have to look him in the eye after, he decides to leave Steve sleeping on the couch. It's in the middle of the night, after all – what's the point of interrupting his sleep just to make him drive home and try to fall asleep again, there? Steve still has the spare key, he can lock up after himself when he leaves for work.

He writes a quick note, just *'Take whatever from the fridge'*, and then he takes Sam and leaves.

Steve shows up at The Bakery later that day before his shift, when Billy's just gotten back from his deliveries, and he looks a bit sheepish as he rubs the back of his neck. He's wearing different clothes and his hair is damp, so he's obviously already been home to shower and change, and as he sits with Sam in the back room – Frank just lets him walk straight past the counter, these days – his cheeks are pink when he says, "I didn't mean to fall asleep. You should have woke me up."

"Nah," Billy says at that. "I've been looking at your ugly mug for weeks, and if anyone needs his beauty sleep, it's you." He's pretty proud of how it wipes the embarrassment from Steve's face, and replaces it with a grin and indignation.

"Fuck you!"

And that's that.

That's the first time Steve stays over, but it's not the last. The following week, when Steve has a late shift the next day, he simply asks if Billy needs a babysitter for the night. Billy shrugs and asks, "You don't mind?" and when Steve shakes his head, he accepts. This time, he wakes up with Sam next to him in his baby nest on the bed, and Steve curled up on the couch with his jacket draped over him.

Billy goes out and buys a blanket and a pillow after that – brand new, even. Just in case.

And then it ... keeps happening. By the time of the first snow, Steve's staying over at least once a week, and Billy and Sam has spent a night over at Steve's place too, on a weekend when his parents weren't there. Steve still insists on paying for whatever takeout they get when they meet up, but happily accepts leftover cookies from The Bakery in return, so Billy doesn't feel too bad about it.

Sam is very happy with Steve there, because Steve seems to have an endless amount of patience to play with him. He can spend hours sitting on the floor next to Sam, talking to Billy while he entertains Sam with home-made or secondhand toys. Sam's favorite toy, for some reason, is a pill bottle that Billy – in a fit of desperation when Sam just *wouldn't stop crying* – threw a bunch of un-boiled macaroni in, and taped shut. The home-made rattle is just the right size that Sam has to hold it with both of his hands, and he seems to never get tired of the sounds it makes when he shakes it.

Sam's getting round and big, and Billy feels an unreasonable amount of pride when the pediatrician tells him, on his latest check-up, that Sam's doing perfectly, both growth- and development-wise. Sam's cheeks are chubby and red, his hair is blonde like Billy's own – lighter now, than it used to be – and his big blue eyes are Billy's, entirely.

"He looks so much like you," Steve says one day, when he and Sam are sitting on the floor – because Sam is *sitting* now, with no support – and playing with (or in Sam's case gnawing on) a wooden spoon.

Steve would know if they look alike, because Billy showed him his own baby photos one day.

“Yeah?” Billy says from the kitchen, where he’s wiping off the counter. “Handsome as hell, then?”

Steve laughs, but doesn’t deny it. And Billy’s glad he’s in another room; it gives him time to wipe the grin off his face before rejoining the others in his living room.

So, by mid-November, it’s very rare that Billy and Steve don’t see each other at least once a day. And people have started to notice. Frank and Dolly knows that they’re friends, and Dolly even took Steve aside one day when they were both in the bakery and told him – according to Steve’s retelling later – that she’s glad that they’re friends now, because Billy needs friends his own age.

Steve said it with a twinkle in his eye and Billy pretended to be embarrassed about it – but he both knows that it’s true, and is happy that Dolly cares enough to notice. So he doesn’t really mind it.

When Steve calls and order them pizzas for delivery, they don’t even ask about his address anymore, but shows up at Billy’s place.

And Doris at the diner saw the two of them hang out *once*, and has since then given *both* of them discounts every time they get food from there. (After Billy declined her offer of a free cigarette, she patted him on the cheek and said, “Good, those things will kill ya,” before shaking one out of her own pack and putting it between her lips, and lighting up.)

And then sometimes, someone will get the wrong idea. Billy’s been lucky so far, in that it has only happened once, and that it wasn’t anyone who’s likely to hurt him for it, but the encounter is ... awkward.

It happens one afternoon in late November. Billy’s parked outside the mall, waiting for Steve to show up since he promised to pick him up after work – Steve having worked the early shift – and since he’s

early for once, he figures he'll go inside. He hasn't been inside the mall for more than a handful of times since it opened, since he wanted to avoid the way people stared at him, but now he has a reason to be here.

Besides, Christmas is only a month away. He's already been invited to spend it with Frank and Dolly, and he figures he should probably start looking for some gifts. Usually, he doesn't spend money on what he deems to be unnecessary things, but he's managed to scrape together something to fall back on, now (him doing laundry at Steve's and Steve paying for a lot of their food helps) – and Frank and Dolly has helped him so much that he wants to get them something good. He wants to show them how grateful he is.

He also wants to find something for Max. Since those first visits, she usually shows up either at the Bakery or at his apartment at least once a week now, and sometimes hangs out with him and Steve during the weekend, too.

And of course, he'll need something for Sam. He may be too small to appreciate what's inside a gift, but Billy's determined that he'll have *something* to open on Christmas morning. Even if he'll be more entertained by the wrapping paper than what's inside, probably.

And then there's Steve. Billy really needs to find something for Steve, too.

So, having twenty minutes to spare before Steve ends his shift, he puts Sam on his arm and braves the mall. As soon as he gets inside, he opens Sam's jacket and pulls off his hat so it won't be too warm for him. He tries in vain to smooth the blonde hair down, but it's charged with static electricity and pointing in all directions. He doesn't know how his own hair was when he was a kid, but he has a vague recollection of his mother trying to water-comb him, so Sam probably gets it from him.

He looks forward to teaching his son the wonders of hairspray, when he gets older.

He's so distracted trying to tame Sam's hair into something manageable, that he rounds a corner without looking and smacks his

shoulder into someone, hard.

“Sorry, man,” he says and looks up. “I –“ The words die on his lips when he sees who’s he’s facing. It’s Gus. Who’s rubbing his shoulder and looking from Billy, to Sam, and back to Billy.

“Uh,” Gus says, and Billy realizes that he never actually saw Sam up close, during their previous encounters. Not so strange, perhaps, considering the nature of what they were doing at the time, but now the guy looks ... thrown, in the face of Billy standing here with his son on his arm.

It’s uncomfortable. They’ve spoken briefly since they ended their arrangement, but the last time they were this close, Billy was on his knees. But, like, there are no hard feelings between them – at least not from Billy’s side – and Gus never treated him bad in any way (not counting lewd remarks), so. “Good to see you,” Billy says. It could have sounded more heartfelt, perhaps, but. A for effort, or whatever.

Strangely, that’s what breaks the ice. Gus laughs, as if acknowledging the tension for what it is, and nods at Sam. “Cute kid.”

“Thanks.”

They both step aside when someone else rounds the corner, and once they’re somewhat out of the way, Billy asks, “So, how have you been?”

They do some small talk after that, which is awkward simply because they never did it before. Billy asks about Gus’ place of work, Gus asks about Billy’s car. The weather is mentioned. Christmas too. When they run out of things to talk about, a couple of minutes later, Billy indicates the rest of the mall with his chin and says, “I should be going. Tell Chris I said hi, yeah?” Because Gus was the one who introduced them, and Billy hasn’t seen Chris up close since he ran out that time when Steve walked in on them, months ago.

To his surprise, though, Gus looks *bashful* at that. “Yeah, uh, will do.”

There’s something about the way he says it. Billy’s not usually very fast on the uptake when it comes to people’s hints – because most of

the times, he doesn't care – but Gus almost looks like –

It clicks. “No way!” Looking around quickly to make sure that no one is listening in, Billy lowers his voice. “You two? *No shit?*”

“Yeah,” Gus says, eyes darting around him. A bit nervous. Billy gets it. It's not exactly something you blurt out loud in Hawkins, Indiana – but he supposes that he should be safe to talk to about it, since he's had both their dicks in his mouth.

Wow. Weird thought right there.

“I'm happy for you two, man,” he says, and finds that he means it.

“Thanks,” Gus says, and gives the softest smile Billy has ever seen on his face. “Right back at ya'.”

Billy's about to nod and be on his way, when the words register. “What?”

“I'm glad you ... found someone, too.”

“I don't –“

“Scoops guy,” Gus says, and pulls the zipper up on his jacket in preparation to leave. “He seems like a good guy.”

“I –“ Billy says. “We don't –“ He doesn't know how to finish that sentence. So he settles on, “Yeah, he is.” Because that, at least, is the truth.

“See you around, then,” Gus says and slaps him lightly on the shoulder as he passes him.

“Yeah,” Billy says and turns, watching him leave. “Yeah.”

Then he turns back and continues into the mall, all thoughts of shopping having flown out the window from this encounter. Gus thought that ... That he and Steve were ...

“What the *fuck?*”

The encounter with Gus stays with him for the rest of the week. He tries to put it out of his mind, but it's nagging at him and won't leave him alone.

Gus thought they were together. Billy and Steve. Together.

It's an insane notion, of course, and Billy doesn't know why he didn't straighten Gus out right away. Steve's amazing – good-looking and caring and *nice* – but he's not into guys the way Billy is. And Billy ... well. He's got Sam now, and hasn't really got the time to be into guys that way, either. Even Steve, who he might have been kinda into a year ago. But now? There's too much else going on. Him and Steve are friends. Good friends, but friends only.

Even though Gus thought they were more than that.

And honestly, when Billy thinks about it, he can understand why Gus made that assumption, wrong as it may be.

Because when Steve and Billy meet up – which is all the time, these days – Steve lights up (and Billy hasn't looked in a mirror, but he imagines that he probably does, as well). Steve never has any qualms about simply plucking Sam from Billy's arms when they go to the store together and he doesn't want to carry the groceries. And the next time when Steve shows up with dinner and enters without knocking, Billy notices that he doesn't even knock anymore, just walks right in.

Also, Billy never took his key back, and he hasn't even thought about that until now.

Now, Billy hasn't had very many close friends so far in his life, but he's pretty sure that whatever he's got going on with Steve goes beyond normal friendship. They meet almost every day, doing the most mundane things. Hell, Billy is eighteen – his bar of what friendship means should be whether he can party with the guy, but he and Steve hasn't even gotten drunk together. Their first get-together was milk and cookies, for fuck's sake!

So. It's definitely not normal.

But it's good.

Billy watches as Steve is lying on the floor, on his belly, facing Sam and making nonsense words at him while they're playing with a rattle that Steve brought over a couple of days ago.

It's *good*.

13. Billy and Neil and the rest of Hawkins

In December, Billy notices a shift in how the Hawkins population see him. It's a gradual thing – so gradual, in fact, that it must have already been going on for a while without him noticing.

People don't avoid him as much, anymore, when he's out with Sam. Sometimes if he can't avoid eye contact, the other person even smiles at him, politely, as if he was just anyone. The gruff man at the gas station nods at him when he pays, the head librarian (not the nice one) doesn't charge him a late fee even when he's three days late returning a book on toddlers, and his favorite nurse that he always talks to when he brings Sam in for his check-ups even stopped and talked to him for a while the last time they bumped into each other in the grocery store.

He's not used to it, but it's nice to not be treated like a pariah.

At first, he thinks it's because of Steve, because everyone likes Steve. But people don't avoid him even when it's just Billy and Sam, even with Steve nowhere in sight. He doesn't mention it to Steve, but he *does* mention it to Frank one day, when Billy comes back from his deliveries a little later than usual, with a confused frown on his face.

"Why are you making that face?" Frank asks and walks around the counter to meet him, glancing at the clock. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"I," Billy says. "The lady who works at the café."

Frank doesn't growl threateningly, but it's a near thing. "Did she say something?"

Billy nods. "She gave me hot chocolate."

"... what?"

"She gave me hot chocolate," Billy repeats, and shakes his head a little, looking down at Sam who's blinking up at him from the baby carrier. "She said it was too cold out, and invited me in, and gave me

yesterday's pecan pie and made me *hot chocolate*."

It had been really good hot chocolate, too. She'd added cinnamon and something else spicy, and refused to tell him what it was, claiming that 'if I tell you how to make it, you won't come back for more'.

"She even had applesauce for Sam."

Billy's pretty sure he's never said a word to that lady before in his life, because she doesn't usually work when he delivers the bread there – but today she had strong-armed him into the café, before it opened, and refused to take no for an answer until he sat down at one of the tables and had a slice of pie and a cup of hot chocolate in front of him. She had sat opposite to him and – after asking permission – held Sam in her lap and fed him applesauce from a little bowl while idly chatting about this and that.

She wasn't even flirting, was the thing. Billy would have known if she'd been flirting. But no. She'd just been ... nice. For ten minutes or so. Without any obvious ulterior motives.

"Oh," Frank says, and relaxes.

Billy glares at him. "What do you mean, 'oh'?"

"I figured it was just a matter of time," Frank says. "Dolly's been singing your praises to her church group, and from what I hear, they're really impressed with how you've handled things."

Billy can feel himself go pale. What do they *know*?

"Don't look so scared," Frank laughs, and moves back behind the counter – apparently he's no longer worried. "You're a good kid. It's not like me and Dolly can keep you to ourselves." Then he inclines his head and grins wider. "Well, us and that Steve kid."

Billy groans as he walks past him, to get into the kitchen and start cleanup.

So. Some people may be more inclined to give him and Sam a chance, nowadays. The holidays are coming up, and maybe that's part of it – the holiday spirit, or whatever – but it makes him breathe easier when he's out and about. Because the disapproving looks are few and far between.

The revelation makes him relax, somewhat, around other people. He finds himself letting his guard down.

Which he deeply regrets one day, two weeks before Christmas, when he's at the mall on a day when Steve's not working, intent on finding him a gift.

He's carrying Sam in the harness (facing outwards, and thoroughly enjoying the looks on people's faces when they're faced with Sam's cherub-like face), and he's got hours to kill and blowjob-savings to spend. He's pointing out every display of colorful lights to Sam, who is suitably impressed, judging by the happy squeals he lets out.

He's already gotten Steve an air freshener for his car; one shaped like a cassette tape, which he's written "awful preppy music" on with a Sharpie, since Steve has the worst music taste known to man. But like. That's for *fun*. He wants to get Steve something *good*, too.

His search takes him into a somewhat fancy clothing store, with too much pastel and beige for his taste – he figures he'll be able to find something in here that will *scream* Steve Harrington, although he's a bit worried about the prices.

He's *not* worried about getting the wrong size. He's been glancing at Steve enough over these last couple of weeks that he can probably make a pretty educated guess.

Plus, he may have accidentally mixed in one of Steve's shirts with his own, the last time he did laundry at the Harrington house. And forgotten to return it. Oops.

Anyway, that shirt had a tag, so yeah, Billy knows his size.

He's busy inspecting a pastel blue Polo with yellow and white stripes (that looks horrible to Billy's eyes, but which is probably right up

Steve's alley) and simultaneously trying to keep Sam's grubby little hands away from it, when a woman's voice says, from just a few feet away:

"What about this one? This is nice, isn't it?"

Billy freezes. That's *Susan's* voice. And if Susan is here, that means –

"It'll do."

A chill washes over Billy, making him shiver. He hasn't heard Neil's voice in months – hasn't *seen* him in months. And suddenly he realizes that he's not prepared to deal with this right now.

From their voices he knows that they're right behind him, but maybe they haven't spotted him yet. His back is to them. His hair is drawn back in a messy ponytail. Maybe they don't recognize him. Maybe he can just ... walk away slowly, without them noticing.

He hangs the Polo back on its rack, but Sam had apparently been entertained by it, and protests by babbling loudly. He's taken to making nonsense words lately, and usually Billy's heart melts at the sound of it. Right now, though, it makes him wince, because –

"Billy?"

He turns around, face neutral, and fixes his eyes on Susan – who's standing by the opposite rack and holding a blue and crisp shirt – because if he focuses on her, he doesn't have to look at his dad.

"Hi, Susan," he says, and is proud to say that his voice is steady.

Sam babbles on, and Susan's attention is drawn to him. Her face splits in a smile. "Oh, he's gotten so big. Hello, Samuel!"

She bends down to talk to him, and Billy's breath catches in his throat, because Neil is standing there in her stead, and his eyes are so *cold*. Billy realizes with a start that Neil's got blue eyes as well, just like Billy, which means that Sam's eyes are the color of Neil's, too. It's a nonsensical thought, but it distracts him from his panic.

He doesn't even know why he's so afraid. He's out from under Neil's

roof, he's got his own place and his own job and his own *family*. He doesn't remember feeling like this even when he was living with the man. He shouldn't tremble when his father's eyes are on him.

But then Neil's cold eyes sweep down over Sam, and something ugly passes over his face. Billy's fear is swept away in a tidal wave of protectiveness, and he turns away abruptly, shielding Sam from them both with his body. Susan stands up straight, looking confused, until she glances back at Neil. Who's still glaring.

Billy inches back. Screw the shirt. He doesn't want to be here.

"Aren't you going to greet your old man?" Neil says, voice deceptively neutral. Just like always, when he's laying a trap.

"Hi dad," Billy grinds out, and hates how he plays along.

"Out Christmas shopping?" Neil continues and glances at the clothes around them, none of which Billy would ever buy for himself. "Or have you finally grown up enough to dress like an adult?"

And that. That's just –

Neil always disapproved of Billy. Of his taste in music, taste in friends; of his car, of his hair, of his earring; of the way he dressed. Billy used to think it was him – that he was wrong, somehow, since it was clear that he was never enough. But now, when he has Sam, he realizes how fucked up that is. Because Sam can grow up and want to wear a goddamn tutu, and Billy will still love him.

"Fuck you," he says, voice almost a whisper.

Neil stiffens, as if he can't believe his ears. "What did you say to me?" His voice is icy and even, like the calm before the storm. Normally, this is where Billy would back down, and try to backtrack. Anything to avoid Neil's wrath. But now? What's Neil going to do, start whaling on him in the Men's section of an overpriced clothing store in the mall?

Off to the side, he sees Susan wring her hands nervously. But he's not looking at her. He's looking at Neil. And he *keeps* looking at Neil – looks him straight in the eye – as he repeats, "Fuck. You."

Neil's eye twitches. If Billy had been living at Cherry and they'd have been out of sight, he'd be on the ground already. But Neil can't get to him here. By the way the man forces a smile – which looks more like a grimace – onto his face, he knows it too.

"Watch your language, son," he says, and lets his eyes flick down to Sam, pointedly. "You're supposed to be a role model now."

It's the first time he even acknowledges Sam, and something in Billy snaps.

"*You* wanna talk about role models?" he sneers. "Really? Because you were *such* a good role model to me when I was a kid. Taught me everything about keeping my mouth shut unless I wanted to get slapped around, or being punished for even mentioning mom, or for not following your goddamn ever-changing rules. You taught me everything I needed to know about abusive fucking assholes like you, and guess what – I'm never going to become like you. I fucking love *my* son. You threw yours out, along with your *own goddamn grandson*. I might not be the perfect dad, but I'm doing a hell of a lot better than you ever did. So yeah, *dad*. Fuck you."

He's working himself up to shouting, and he doesn't notice that the chatter of voices from the other customers have stopped until he draws in a shuddery breath and finds that everything – except for the tinny Christmas music playing in the background – has gone silent.

He blinks rapidly to get rid of the tears that he can feel well up in his eyes, and swallows. Turns his head to glance around him.

There are several people just standing there, either looking away in discomfort or outright staring at the scene he's just made.

"Sir?" a voice says, calm but stern. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave the store."

Billy takes a shuddery breath and bites his lip. He's still brimming with anger, but he also kind of wants to roll up in a ball and cry, and he realizes that he has to get out of here before he loses it completely. Well, even more than he already has. So he looks up. The first thing he sees is Neil's smug grin, which ignites the flare of anger

in him once again. The second thing he sees is the store clerk, standing there and directing his politely apologetic gaze ...

... at Neil.

“If you’d be so kind,” the guy says, and it’s not until then that Neil seem to realize that it’s *him* that’s being addressed. He splutters.

“What?”

“This company doesn’t condone that kind of behavior,” the clerk says, and looks pointedly at the exit.

“I’m not the one who was just making a scene!” Neil says, almost yells, and waves his arms around, making a scene.

Susan reaches out for his elbow. “Neil, maybe we should –” But Neil shakes her off, turning to point at Billy.

“No, Susan. We’re not the ones who should leave, not when it’s that useless fucking faggot who –”

Billy freezes at the word, and Susan gasps. The clerk, though, takes a step and places himself subtly between Neil and Billy, just as a nearby woman in her fifties pipes up, disapprovingly: “Really, there’s no need for that kind of language. There are *children* present.”

Billy’s fingers tighten protectively around Sam’s body.

“Like I said,” the clerk says, and this time his voice is colder. “We don’t condone that kind of behavior here.”

Neil turns to look at the people around them, mouth open as if he’s about to protest. But whatever he sees on their faces – Billy’s pointedly *not* looking; afraid of what he’ll find there – makes him close his mouth with a clack. There’s fury in his eyes as he turns, abruptly, and stalks out of the store without a backwards glance, only throwing a sharp “Susan! We’re leaving!” over his shoulder as he goes.

To her credit, Susan makes sure to return the shirt she’d been holding to the rack, before turning to leave. But not before giving Billy and

Sam one last look. For a second, there's a ghost of a smile on her face, as she tells him, "You're doing good, Billy." Then she follows her husband out of the store.

Billy finds that he has, somehow, forgotten how to breathe, and it's only when he no longer can see either Neil or Susan that he draws in a sharp, desperate breath. The store clerk appears in front of him – a man in his forties with a name tag proclaiming him to be 'Roger' – and his voice is back to pleasant and polite as he says, "I'm sorry about that. Now, did you need any help finding something?"

Glancing around, Billy finds that most people in the store have resumed their shopping now that there's no more drama. Except for the lady who spoke up earlier – she makes sure he's looking at her when she gives him an approving nod, and then picks up her purchases and makes her way over to another employee.

Billy can't really wrap his mind around what just happened. His heart is beating double-time in his chest and he can feel himself trembling. The clerk – Roger – takes the Polo that Billy had been holding before, and gently nudges his arm to get him moving towards the dressing rooms. Once there, he leaves Billy and Sam and the Polo alone in the little room, and pulls the curtain shut with a "Let me know if you need any help."

And there, out of sight of everyone's eyes, all air leaves Billy. His legs go wobbly, and he has to sit down on the little chair in the corner and breathe, just *breathe*. Distantly, he can hear Sam making noises at his own reflection – they're sitting right in front of a mirror – but he doesn't sound unhappy so Billy takes a minute to just ... get his beating heart and shaking hands under control.

He didn't think that just seeing Neil would make him react this way. He definitely didn't think he'd dare to go off on the man like he had. And in no way, in any world, would he have expected anyone – let alone *several people* – to take his side over Neil's.

A couple of minutes pass, and then a pair of shiny shoes stop outside the dressing room and Roger's voice drifts in. "Everything alright in there?"

Billy clears his throat and gets to his feet. "Yeah, um. Yeah." He gets to his feet and pulls open the curtain again, not meeting the other man's eyes. He doesn't know what to say, so he says nothing. After a couple of seconds of tense silence, Roger is the one who breaks it.

"You know," he says, conversationally but in a low voice. "I have a niece." Billy looks up, somewhat confused at this sudden change in topic. "She's a bright girl, starting high school next year. When my sister got pregnant with her, at nineteen, our father threw her out. She came to live with me, for a while, before she and my niece's father could make arrangements to get married and find a place to live. They're still married. Have a house half an hour out of Chicago. They have a dog and everything."

He smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "Our father was a piece of ... work. I meant what I said out there. We don't condone that behavior, here." He looks down at Sam, who waves his arms and legs excitedly at the attention, and his smile warms a bit. "Children are innocent," he continues. "And it's a small town. Word gets around."

With that, he straightens up and says, a bit louder and in his polite store clerk-voice, "Now, how was that fit? Good?"

Billy has to clear his throat twice before he feels like he can get the words out. "Yeah," he says. "Good. Perfect."

"Great," Roger says and takes the – obviously untouched – Polo from its hanger. "Do you want me to ring it up for you? Or do you want to come back for it later?"

He's offering Billy an out, Billy realizes with a jolt; if he doesn't want – or can't afford – the shirt. Billy's legs feel like jelly under him, but he finds himself shaking his head. "No, I'll ... I'll take it." Because it's the least he can do. This store, preppy and expensive as it is, just became his favorite store in the mall – at least after Scoops.

"Very well," Roger says with a smile.

When he's taken Billy's money and handed back his change – which Billy is pretty sure is more than he should have gotten – he busies himself with wrapping the shirt up in brightly colored paper with a

tasteful white ribbon. Billy almost asks how he knew it was a gift, but then he glances down at himself in his worn jeans, ratty Henley and old leather jacket, and figures that it was probably pretty obvious.

“There we go,” Roger says when he’s done and hands Billy his bag. “Merry Christmas, now, to you and yours.” He looks down pointedly at Sam, who’s busy playing with a ball of scrunched-up ribbon that Roger handed him earlier.

Billy takes the bag. Swallows. Wets his lips, and finally dares to look the man in the eye.

“Thank you.”

Notes for the Chapter:

What's with all these random OC's?
Schhhh, they're needed for the story. That's just how it is. Like in life. Random people showing up, doing an act of kindness, and then disappearing again ...

14. Billy and Steve and Sam and their house

Notes for the Chapter:

Double updates today; this chapter, and the epilogue!
Thank you to everyone who has followed this, read it
and commented. Means a whole lot. < 3

Christmas is ... nice. Nicer than Billy knew it could be. Even when his mom was still in the picture, the holidays were tense with something threatening looming over all of them. After she left, well. It got worse.

But this year, it's actually enjoyable. Billy spends Christmas Eve working, but there aren't that many customers and he gets to take home a veritable horde of leftover cookies and bread to put in the freezer (strangely enough, most of them are Billy's favorite kinds), which may have been Frank's plan all along, judging from his wholly unsurprised expression.

Christmas Day is spent at Frank and Dolly's place. Their daughter Allie, from Chicago, is there too, along with her husband Gregory and their twin daughters, who are only slightly over a month younger than Sam. Billy is a little worried about spending so much time with people who are so important to Frank and Dolly – he wants to make a good impression – but with three babies under the same roof, he needn't have worried. After the second baby throws up in under an hour, the ice is more than broken, and Billy spends twenty minutes discussing baby-induced sleep-deprivation with Allie and Greg while the children are on the floor, on a giant quilt that Dolly put there for them.

Sam, being the oldest and already crawling, is fascinated by the twins, and is moving around them where they're lying on their bellies on the blanket, and only once does he bonk his head into one of them to make the both of them cry. After a couple of minutes of consolation, everyone is happy again and the rest of the evening passes without incident.

There's good food, good company, and the exchange of gifts. Billy

gets a hand-knitted sweater from Dolly which is so not his style, but which he will wear anyway; a set of tools from Frank – “So you won’t have to borrow mine every time you need something done,” which, that was *one time*; and a souvenir fridge magnet that doubles as a bottle opener that says ‘Chicago’ on it from Allie and Greg, which makes him laugh and doesn’t make him feel bad for not getting them anything. In return, Billy’s bought Frank a semi-expensive bottle of whiskey and a book by a psychologist on how to deal with retirement (which Frank laughs at until there are tears in his eyes), and a box of chocolates and a scarf for Dolly. The scarf, he thinks, matches the coat she wore all through autumn, and judging by the way she lights up when she pulls it out of the gift bag, it’s a success.

They got Sam presents, too, and went overboard with it just like they did for their own grandchildren. He gets toys, clothes, and a set of baking tools for children (a tiny wooden rolling pin, cookie cutters, a tiny whisk and a plastic bowl) because, as Frank puts it as he claps Billy on the arm, “In case he wants to grow up to be a baker, just like his dad.”

It makes something warm bloom in Billy’s chest.

In the evening, when it’s time to go home, Billy has to take two trips to his car. One with Sam, who’s already conked out, and then one more to pick up a couple of plastic bags – one full of presents, and one full of Tupperware containers with leftovers that Dolly won’t let him leave without.

He gets home, puts everything away, and stumbles into bed next to a sleeping Sam, feeling warm and full and happy.

He doesn’t actually give Sam his own presents until two days later. Because that’s when Steve finally shows up, having been busy with his parents being home for the holiday. Now, Steve barges in with his arms full of bags and containers, and drops everything on the counter in the kitchen before lying down on the floor in front of Sam, face down, groaning loudly.

Billy laughs. “Merry Christmas, Steve.”

Steve mumbles something into the floor that might have been a 'Merry Christmas'.

"You look beat, man."

He actually turns his head to reply this time. "I *am* beat. Jesus Christ. A whole three days spent with my parents? I got cramps in my face because I faked smiling for so long. You have no idea how nice it is to come here and not have to *pretend*."

They hardly ever talk about their families, but Billy can guess how things are in the Harrington house, just like Steve probably suspects how Billy had it back on Cherry Lane.

"What is all this?" Billy asks and peers into the bags, lifts the lid off of some containers.

"Leftovers," Steve says. "Mom had catering for Christmas, and they won't be back until the end of January, so it's not like they're gonna be around to eat it."

Instead of pointing out that his fridge is already full of leftovers from Frank and Dolly's house, Billy raises an eyebrow. "But *you* will be."

"Yeah, but," Steve says, and heaves himself up from the floor, dusting off his pants. "I'll be here, so." And he makes it sound so obvious. Like *of course* he'll be here, so naturally the food should be here too. It makes Billy feel some kind of way, but instead of pondering it further, he just starts cramming things away into the fridge. There are a couple of wrapped gifts in the bags as well, which he leaves on the counter.

Steve claims he has to get something from his car, and comes back with a huge gift with a comically small bow on top, and when Billy starts protesting, he laughs. "Calm down, it's for Sam!" Which only makes Billy even more curious about what's inside.

With so much leftovers, and with Sam having started eating real food (just cut up into tiny pieces and mashed up with whatever sauce or jam they can find), between the three of them they enjoy a veritable feast. They eat until they can't move, and Billy absent-mindedly tells

himself that he'll deal with the dishes tomorrow.

"Time for presents?" Steve asks, and he actually looks excited so Billy can't say no.

"Sure," he says and groans as he gets up from the couch to go and get some presents from the bedroom. The ones for Sam, and the ones for Steve. When he reenters the living room, Steve has arranged his own gifts on the cinderblock table. There's a small pile on one end, and a big pile – including the big mystery gift – on the other end.

Not much for ceremony, Billy simply dumps Steve's gifts into his lap, with a "Merry Christmas or whatever".

In return, Steve points at the smaller pile and tells him to "Go nuts."

Steve laughs at the air freshener, looks pleasantly surprised by the striped Polo shirt, and immediately attaches the ice cream shaped keychain that Billy got from the gas station to his set of keys. Billy has also baked him a special batch of sugar cookies, all shaped like different haircare products, which makes Steve laugh again even as he bites into one shaped like a hairspray can.

Billy gets a book (Stephen King's *'Skeleton crew'*, a collection of short stories, which suits him well since he doesn't have the time to read for longer periods of time these days), an album (Megadeth's *'Killing Is My Business... and Business Is Good!'*, which looks promising), a pair of small silver earrings in the shape of simple loops ("Less chance of Sammy ripping them out of your ears if they're small, I guess"), and a set of six matching drinking glasses ("Honestly, Billy, you don't have a single glass without a crack in it, and last time I was over you were drinking out of an old jar!").

All in all, a pretty good haul.

Then it is time for Sam to open his presents. Steve hands Billy a gift from Sam's pile. "Wait. Open this one first."

Billy does, and gasps at what's inside. There is a camera in the box. Not in its original packaging or anything, so it's obviously been used, but it's a goddamn *camera*.

“ ... hate to break it to you, Steve, but I don’t think Sam’s gonna be able to use this one for a while.”

Steve slaps him on the arm. “Stupid. It’s for you to take pictures of him, of course.” Billy’s just staring at him, and maybe it’s making Steve uncomfortable because he keeps talking. “You showed me that photo album with pictures of you as a kid, and I figured that Sam should get to have one of those too. And it’s not like it was expensive. Jonathan helped me find a used one for real cheap, he even helped me set it up. It’s got film in it and everything, it’s ready to use.” He scratches at the nape of his neck awkwardly, then gestures vaguely at the baby. “I mean. It’s his first Christmas.”

Billy gingerly picks up the camera from the box, from the balled-up pages of newspaper it had been surrounded by, and turns it over, trying to figure out how to use it. Steve plucks it from his hands and points at parts of it while explaining what to do, then scoots back and holds it up.

“I’ll take the first one,” he says, and points at Sam. “Pick him up.” Billy does, and arranges himself in the couch so that he’s holding Sam up to the camera, making it look like he’s standing up all by himself. “Great,” Steve says. “Now smile.”

Billy smiles.

Steve hesitates only for a moment, before snapping the photo and lowering the camera. He winds it up, hands it back to Billy, and takes Sam from him instead. “Good,” he says. “That was a good one.”

Billy takes the camera, and points it at where Steve is currently placing a smaller gift in front of Sam, showing him how to pull off the paper. In the viewfinder of the camera, it looks so domestic. Steve’s in the corner of the couch, turned in Billy’s direction, with Sam in front of him. He’s leaning in to pull at the paper, hair falling in his eyes. He’s smiling. Sam’s smiling too.

It makes Billy’s heart ache. He wants to keep this forever. So he snaps a photo.

The rest of the gifts are, thankfully, not as expensive as the camera

must have been. There are a couple of picture books for toddlers, a squeaky toy that Billy is pretty sure is for dogs but that Sam takes to immediately, and a jigsaw puzzle with a whopping six pieces.

The last present, the big one, is opened by Billy (since Sam lost interest in opening presents after the first one, and was – just like Billy predicted – more interested in the crinkly wrapping paper and his new chew toy), and turns out to be a car seat. New, still in the box.

“Steve,” Billy says, voice serious, because he *knows* what they cost, okay? He’s been researching them, saving up for when Sam outgrows the baby carrier. The car seats he saw in the Sears catalogue that looked like this one was over sixty bucks. And that, on top of everything else, is ... “It’s too much.”

Steve looks a bit flushed, his cheeks red, but at this he straightens up and puffs out his chest. “Well too bad, because I’ve lost the receipt.”

“Steve –“

“Look. When he gets too big for that thing –“ Steve points with a thumb over his shoulder without looking, at the baby carrier that’s in its place by the door, “– what are you gonna do, huh? I researched it, and there’s an *actual* law that kids have to be in one of these if they’re in your car. And it’s not like you’re gonna deprive Sammy here of drives in the Camaro, right?”

Billy opens his mouth to say ... something. There are lots of things he wants to say. He wants to say that of course he’s gonna bring Sam with him in the Camaro – he already can’t wait until he gets older, and can appreciate the purr of the engine and the way she takes the turns. He also wants to say that he’s not a charity case, and that if he needs a car seat, he can buy his own damn car seat (not technically a lie; he’d just have to sacrifice his savings). And he wants to say thank you ... but doesn’t know how.

But what comes out, instead of all that, is, “You *researched* it?” Because that’s what stands out.

During the months of knowing Steve, Billy has gotten the impression

that researching, and reading in general, isn't really Steve's thing. It doesn't matter, and he hasn't mentioned it, but to know that Steve not only shelled out for this kind of expensive present, but also researched it beforehand – it feels big.

“Shut up,” Steve says and pushes his shoulder. “I know how to read.”

“Yeah, I know, I just ...”

“Besides,” Steve continues. “It’s for *Samuel*.” He picks Sam up and holds him so that he’s dangling over the box, swaying him from side to side. “Do you like your present, Sam?”

Sam, as in 90% of the times when someone’s swinging him from side to side, laughs delightedly and kicks his legs so that they drum against the box. Steve turns a smug look to Billy. “See? He likes it.”

Faced with a laughing Sam and a smiling Steve, Billy gives up. He knows a losing battle when he sees one. “Fine,” he says, dramatically. But then he smiles, to let Steve know that he’s not really mad. “But seriously. It’s too much, but ... Thanks.”

Steve shrugs, his cheeks still a little pink. “I wanted to.”

And that’s the thing. He did this awesome, nice thing for Billy – and Sam – just because he wanted to. Billy’s used to everything having a price, somehow. It’s only recently that he’s started hanging around people who doesn’t seem to have an agenda, or want anything from him other than ... well. Whatever it is he’s bringing to his and Steve’s friendship.

The silence after this is a little bit too long to feel natural, but Billy breaks it by clearing his throat. “Well, still. I feel bad about the keychain now.”

“Are you kidding?” Steve exclaims and digs up his keys from his pocket so he can show them off, glittery little ice-cream and all. “I love this thing!”

Somewhat later, when Billy has put Sam to bed (and with Steve watching from the doorway), the two of them are sprawled out across the couch. Both of them are full, but neither one of them lets that

stop them from nibbling on the leftover cookies from The Bakery, and each drinking a Coke.

“I am *so full*,” Steve complains while unbuttoning his pants with a groan and reaching for another cookie.

Billy kicks at his arm to stop him, but misses. He thinks about doing it again, but decides not to, because that would mean that he’d have to sit up properly, and he’s afraid that if he does that, he’ll actually throw up. Instead he just laughs. “Then stop eating.”

Steve looks offended. “The holidays were made for over-eating, Billy. It’s a goddamn American *tradition*!”

“I’m not arguing with you,” Billy says, hands splayed out in surrender. “Just don’t puke on the floor. I’m pretty sure it’d get stuck in the cracks and I’d never get rid of the smell.”

“I wouldn’t mind this place even if it smelled like puke,” Steve says, and burrows deeper into the couch, so that one of his socked feet touches Billy’s.

“It *does* smell like puke, sometimes,” Billy comments, because he’s pretty sure he’s wiped Sam’s puke and drool off every surface of this place since they moved in. “It’s a dump.”

Steve just hums, and leans his head against the cushion. Closes his eyes. “I like it here,” he says. “It’s nice. Feels like a real place, you know? Like a place where people actually live.” He sighs, and it sounds a little wistful.

“That’s because people do actually live here,” Billy points out, but softly, and not as sarcastic as he meant to.

“I guess,” Steve says, and drags a hand through his hair. “But like. At my place, it doesn’t feel like that. It’s just, big and empty. Filled with furniture, not people. I like it better here. I never sleep as well there as I do here.”

Billy is speechless for a moment, but then he finds his voice. “You realize you just said that you sleep better *here*, in an apartment with a *baby* and someone who works nights, right?”

“Yup,” Steve says without opening his eyes.

“Dude. That makes no sense. You sleep on the couch.”

“It’s a very comfortable couch.”

“That’s bullshit. It’s lumpy and it smells.”

“Not that bad.”

“Oh my god.” Billy has to laugh, and that makes Steve crack a smile too. Then he opens his eyes, takes a deep breath, and sits up with a groan, holding one hand to his stomach.

“Oh my god I feel pregnant,” he whines.

That makes Billy laugh even harder. “You shouldn’t have eaten those last ten cookies then.”

“They were good cookies!”

“Of course they were. I made them.”

Steve nods, like ‘true’, and then he stretches like a cat. His shirt rides up, and his belly – bulging with food – almost distracts Billy from his words when he says, “Man, I really need to move out, and soon. I can’t take my parents anymore.”

On the one hand, Billy understands – in hindsight, getting out from under Neil’s roof was the best thing that happened to him. But on the other hand, he knows the difficulties of it, too – of trying to make ends meet, and all the housework that needs to be done in between everything else – so living in a big house by himself, for free, and only occasionally having to share it with other people? It sounds like a dream.

But he doesn’t know Steve’s situation, or his parents, so he doesn’t say that. Instead, he nods and tries to think of something helpful to say.

“You should save up for a deposit then, if you haven’t already. Preferably so you’ll find a better place than this one. And, like, if you

can bring some cleaning supplies and kitchen stuff with you from home without your parents noticing, do that. Shit's expensive, if you buy new."

"Did *you* buy new?" Steve asks, and raises one pointed eyebrow at mismatched plates on the table.

Billy snorts. "As if! Yard sales is the key, my friend. But it's winter, so not a lot of those around right now."

Steve sits in relative quiet for a while, and Billy almost dozes off where he's sitting – too full and too comfortable to fight it off. But then Steve speaks again, catching his attention.

"You know," he says, a thoughtful look on his face. "I *could* probably get a small and crappy apartment somewhere, with what I make at Scoops."

Billy points a finger at him in support. "That's the spirit."

"Or ..." And at this, he fixes Billy with an intense stare. "I could find a *roommate*, to get a bigger and *better* apartment with."

For just a second, Billy's heart twinges in jealousy – because if Steve gets a roommate and *likes* his roommate, then he'll have less time to hang out with Billy – but then it clicks. Steve means *him*.

"Wh-what?"

"Oh come on," Steve says, and plants both his feet on the floor in order to lean forward and gesticulate to show how serious he is, "it'd be perfect! I'm here all the time anyway, so for one, we *know* that we get along! Second of all, *I* need to move out, and *you* just said that this place is a dump – so why don't we pool our resources together and get a better place?" Billy opens his mouth to answer, to say *something*, but Steve continues, "Think about it! We can take turns with the cooking and the cleaning and all that boring stuff – and Sam! Hey! Free babysitting whenever I'm home, right?"

While Steve is listing off reasons why this is a good idea – reasons that make a whole lot of sense, actually – Billy considers it. *Actually* considers it.

What would it be like, to share a place with Steve? To share meals with him, and share a bathroom with him, and to go to bed and know that he would be there in the morning?

Honestly? Not that much different than how things are now.

Meaning, it would *work*.

A part of him wants to warn Steve off, ask him if he's sure and if he knows what he's *doing* – because Billy keeps strange hours, not to mention that he has a *baby* who demands most of his time and attention – but he doesn't have to. Steve knows all that already. And he still suggested it.

This was *Steve's idea*.

And Billy *wants* to. He really, really wants to. So he decides to be selfish, for once.

“Steve,” he says, interrupting Steve in the middle of him promising that they can still go to his parents’ place for laundry.

“... yeah?”

“Sounds good.” He can't help but smile.

Steve smiles too, and his eyes crinkle at the corners. “Really?”

“Yeah.” And Billy's full-on grinning now. “Let's do it.”

Billy half expects Steve to forget about it in the coming days, because the more he thinks about it, the more he figures that Steve can't possibly have been serious. But then Steve barges into The Bakery one day on his day off (he gets less hours in December, apparently, on account of there being less customers who wants to buy ice-cream at Scoops during the holidays – Billy is honestly surprised that they're still open with how few customers they seem to have), and slams a newspaper down on the counter, with an ad circled in blue pen.

It's an ad for an apartment, and it seems a bit on the pricey side, but

Billy's too surprised that Steve was actually serious to point that out, and agrees to come with him to check it out the next day.

The apartment is a disappointment. The first of many, as it turns out.

Over the course of the next month, they look at several apartments and places to live, to see if it's something that would fit them. Billy stops counting at the fifth place, but they must have talked to at least a dozen people and seen at least ten places by now.

The first one's too expensive.

The second one is even smaller than the one that Billy's in now.

The third one is actually a house, although tiny, and in someone's yard. It has a kitchenette and a toilet, but the shower is inside the main house where a retired man live with his two large dogs. So, no.

The fourth consists of the top floor of a two-story house, with its own entrance, and it's great – only the woman who is renting it out “isn't comfortable renting it out to two young men”. Billy's disappointed, sure, but he knows that both he and Steve has – or had, in Steve's case – a reputation in this town, and the lady has two kids of her own, one a toddler and one slightly older, so he can't begrudge here for being cautious. Steve apparently can, though, judging by his grumbling.

The fifth one is cheap, but doesn't have a bathroom. “Yet,” as the guy who rents it says, and offers to deduct some money on the deposit if they fix it up. But like. Billy's got enough on his plate without having to learn how to do plumbing, thank you. So no.

One of the places is *literally* a basement. No windows.

And it continues like that. Who would have thought it'd be so difficult to find an okay place to live, when you're a teenage dad with a baby, on a budget, who wants to move in with your best friend?

Frank only laughs at him when he says that out loud one day at work, and slaps him on the back.

“You'll find something eventually,” he says, and he sounds so sure

about it that Billy – who is kind of worrying that Steve will give up and scrap the whole idea if they don't catch a break soon – can't help but feel reassured.

And what do you know? It does work out, eventually.

Steve has been putting out feelers all over town lately, and one day there's a message on his parents' answering machine from a man – a friend of a friend of Dolly's, apparently – who had an elderly aunt who passed away at the start of the year. He's her only heir, and she lived in a small house in Hawkins until she ended up in the hospital, back in November, and now he's got this too-small house which is still full of her stuff and if they can help him clear it out he can give them a fair price on rent, are they interested?

They are.

The place is decently sized for two people, with two bedrooms and a real kitchen, and windows in three directions. It's a bit run-down and dated, though – the kitchen backsplash is turquoise and doesn't match with the wooden cabinets, and the tiling in the bathroom is light green, thus matching the toilet, sink and bathtub, which are the same horrible color. Color choices aside, it's pretty obvious that an old lady has been living there for the past thirty years. There are like fifty ceramic figurines spread out on the windowsills.

What the guy, Henry, failed to mention was that his aunt was apparently somewhat of a cat lady. Or at least she had been, before she ended up in the hospital and her cats were adopted by people from the Church. The place smells like cat pee, and there is cat hair and dust on every surface – not that there are many unoccupied surfaces. Henry's aunt also seemed to have some hoarder tendencies.

It's a lot of work, to clear out her place, and it takes many trips to the junk yard to get rid of everything that they don't want to keep, after Henry has taken what he wanted. Once the place is empty, it's clear how run-down it really is. They spend every waking hour when they're not working or tending to Sam deep-cleaning the place, and when they're done with that, they tear down old wallpaper, putty the walls, and put up new paint on the walls and ceilings – everywhere but the bathroom, which thankfully has tiles from floor to ceiling.

They're not professional by any means, and it's a bit half-assed, maybe, but at least they get the job done.

It's the tail end of February when they're finally ready to move in.

Billy's room in the little house is about twice the size of his bedroom in his old place. He can fit the bed as well as all his stuff in there, and he took a bookcase that Henry didn't want from the living room, and put it in one corner. He also left room in the other corner for Sam, determined that he will buy a crib or something at the first opportunity, now when he can't blame lack of space anymore.

Steve brings a lot of his stuff from home, and basically decorates his new room the same as his old one – figuring that “That way, I know where everything is already”.

They paid 100 bucks to leave the lady's (surprisingly comfortable) couch and pristine coffee table, and 50 bucks for the kitchen table and four chairs. They got the armchair and some bookcases for free, as well as their pick of the furniture that Henry didn't have any use for; a clothes hanger to keep in the hall, an old chest, a couple of lamps, and a dresser (with ugly flowers painted all over it which they'll have to repaint at some point – but at least it was free!).

The best thing about the place, though? Is the bathtub, hands down. Yes, it's green and yes, it's not as big as the ones at the Harrington house, but it's a *bathtub*. In *Billy's* home.

They had a bathtub at Cherry Lane too, but Billy only used it a couple of times, and only when he knew Neil wasn't going to be home for a while. He took exactly one bath at Steve's old place, that one time, and that was amazing. But here, it's right there, in their own bathroom. Theoretically, he can take a bath any time he wants to, now.

That's why it's the first thing he does, on the first night they spend in their new home.

Frank told Billy that he'd work the early shift at The Bakery tomorrow, and that Billy could show up later in the morning so they'd have time to get everything in order, with unpacking and

sorting through stuff. So he doesn't even have to go to bed early. He's got the whole evening to himself.

So, while Steve's trying to sort out the TV – he brought the one from the den at his parents' house, apparently – Billy brings Sam with him into the bathroom. Sam has been very happy with the new place so far, he keeps pointing at new things and calling everything “dadada” or “wuh” – which Billy chooses to interpret as “awesome” and “I like this very much, good work dad” – and now he's standing on wobbly toddler legs, holding on to the edge of the tub while Billy fills the bottom of it up with warm water.

He doesn't fill it up even halfway, just four or five inches or so, before he grabs Sam under his arms, and step into the tub with him. He sits down, and gently places Sam in front of him, between his knees, watching as Sam is fascinated by the water around his legs.

“You like this?” he asks, getting a ‘*buh buh buh*’ in reply. “Yeah, I thought you would. Just like daddy. Next time, we're making bubbles.”

He makes a mental note to buy bubble bath at some point. Some toys for the tub. Maybe a rubber duck.

It hits him, then.

He can buy a rubber duck for Sam, because now they live in a place that has a bathtub. A bigger, better place, and since he's sharing it with Steve, it's cheaper than his old place. He'll be able to put away more money now than before. Won't have to consider each and every dollar he spends. He'll be able to buy a rubber duck, and a crib, and –

And he's sharing a house with Steve.

Steve. Is sharing a house with Billy and Sam. *Willingly*. Steve knows most of Billy's secrets, he has seen Billy at his worst, and he's still here. Hasn't left, hasn't pushed him away or been disgusted with him. Has been nothing but supportive. And, most importantly, he *loves Sam*.

A year ago, he and Steve were avoiding each other as much as they

could, after the awkwardness that followed after their fight. Billy was top dog at school, only to go home to a house that wasn't a home, to a father who never loved him.

In a year, Billy's become a father, gotten out from under Neil's roof, gotten a job (and a boss and a friend), sold sexual favors, moved into not only one but *two* new places, and befriended his old high-school rival. If he could go back and tell Billy from a year ago how life would turn out for him in only a year, Billy's pretty sure he'd have punched himself in the face.

But.

He looks at Sam, who has found a half-empty shampoo bottle that he's playing with, and his heart swells.

Life may not have turned out the way he expected, but right now? He wouldn't have it any other way.

When the water turns colder, Billy gets out of the tub. He dries Sam off with a towel – one of Steve's, so it's soft and fluffy – and kisses his tummy until he giggles. After pulling his own hair back in a ponytail so he won't have to deal with it (he'll have time to fix it before work tomorrow), he wraps another towel around his waist and exits the bathroom, holding a naked Sam on one arm.

He finds Steve in the living room – *their* living room – in front of the TV. Which is working. Currently, there's a commercial on for toothpaste. But no toothpaste commercial in the world can beat the absolutely blinding grin that Steve throws his way when he turns, one arm casually resting over the back of the couch, and gesturing with the remote control to the TV.

"I made it work!" he says, grinning, looking very pleased with himself. "I'm a technical genius."

And it's then and there, with Steve smiling at him, in the house that they just moved into together, that the penny finally drops.

He likes Steve.

He *like*-likes Steve.

He blames that smile – Steve’s dazzling smile, that Billy has had directed at him for months now without recognizing the fluttery feeling in his stomach for what it was – for what happens next.

He puts Sam down on the floor, on the one rug they own. He takes half a second to make sure that Sam’s okay with being left there, and then he closes the distance to the couch in a couple of long strides. Steve’s looking up at him, still grinning, still so proud that he got the TV to work.

And Billy can’t help himself. He reaches out and touches his fingers to Steve’s chin, tilting his face up.

Then he leans down, and just has time to see Steve’s eyes widen before he closes his own eyes, and places a kiss on Steve’s lips.

It’s the gentlest of kisses, their lips barely touching. Such a small thing. Such a big thing.

Such a *monumentally stupid thing*. Fuck.

Steve pulls away, and Billy can’t breathe. Is afraid to open his eyes, so he *doesn’t*, because he doesn’t want to see the disgust on Steve’s face, or worse, the *pity* – he’s fucked it up, on the first fucking day of them living together, this is like Steve seeing him behind the dumpsters all over again only *worse* –

Steve gasps, loudly, and pushes him away – his hand on Billy’s bare shoulder burns. So does Billy’s eyes.

“Billy!” Steve says. Hisses.

And Billy’s not a coward. It was a moment of weakness. He’s going to own up to it, is going to take responsibility for his actions. Is going to apologize –

“Billy!” Steve hisses again, and ... slaps his shoulder?

Billy opens his eyes in surprise, expecting ... well, *some* kind of reaction, honestly. What he’s not expecting is Steve not even looking

at him – looking very intently *past* him, actually, and not looking like he's disgusted at all. There's a look of awe on his face, of *wonder*, and –

“*Billy!*” Steve repeats, and forcibly grabs his face and turns him around.

Just in time to see Sam wobble and fall on his butt. From where he had been standing. Or, *walking*.

Everything else in the world fades away as Billy doubles back to Sam and slides down on his knees next to him on the floor. “Are you *kidding* me? Did you just *walk*?”

Sam looks up at him, confused, with a hand in his mouth. Billy hears Steve jump over the back of the couch and joins them.

“He walked!” he confirms. “I saw it!”

There's a pang in Billy's chest for almost missing it. But then Steve's right there, pulling Sam up to stand on his feet again. When he lets go, Sam's still standing. Swaying a bit, but standing. Without holding on to anything.

Billy scoots back a bit, and holds his arms out. “Come on! Come to daddy!”

Sam takes a whopping four stumbly steps before he falls, but Billy's there to catch him before he hits the floor. “You did it!” He swings him up in the air – and Sam shrieks and laughs like he always does – and then hugs him close, skin against skin, heart beating hard in his chest and with a grin so wide it hurts.

He glances up at Steve, who's sitting on the floor a couple of feet away. Their eyes meet. And there's nothing but adoration on Steve's face, when he looks at Billy and Sam there. Billy can imagine the image they make; Billy in only a towel and Sam in nothing at all.

“Let's see if he can do it again!” Steve says, and stands up on his knees. He reaches out for Sam, and Billy hands him over. As he does, his fingers touch Steve's, and they look at each other. And Billy blushes, because he realizes that they just *kissed* – for a second there,

with all the excitement, he'd actually forgotten.

From the pink tint on Steve's cheeks, though, Steve didn't forget. And from the smile on his face, he didn't mind.

He's holding on to Sam – or, rather, Sam's little hands are holding on to Steve's fingers, for balance – and walking after Sam, slowly, on his knees as Sam stumbles around on the floor. Both of them smiling.

Billy's feeling drunk. He's feeling stupid, happy, hopeful. He's feeling *reckless*.

So when Sam gets tired of walking around (even with help) and sits his butt down on the floor, and Steve gives him a kiss on the head and tells him how good he did, Billy walks over to them, on his knees.

This time, when he leans in, he does so slowly; giving Steve the chance to back away. But Steve stays. This time, Billy's eyes are open, and he sees Steve's eyes widen again. But not in surprise.

And this time, Steve kisses back.

15. Epilogue: Billy and Steve and Sam and the rest of their days

Notes for the Chapter:

(Double updates today: this one, and the last one - don't miss it!)

It's one of the warmest days so far this summer, and just the walk across the parking lot has Billy sighing in relief when he gets inside the blessedly air-conditioned mall. He bends over the stroller and pulls off Sammy's little sun hat – he won't need it in here – and tries to tame his hair.

In vain, of course. His son has hair like a troll doll.

Babbling incoherently in protest, Sam ducks under his hand and starts rocking back and forth, until Billy laughs and lifts him out of the stroller. Sam immediately runs a couple of steps ahead before he stops, and turns around to look at Billy. “Dada!”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” Billy says and puts the sunhat and his bag next to the Metallica bear in the stroller so he won't have to carry them. “I'm coming. You gonna run ahead?”

Turns out Sam's *not* gonna run ahead. He's usually pretty good with venturing out on his own, but is still a bit hesitant when there's too many people around (which, Billy approves). So instead of running off he runs back to Billy and smacks into his leg, wrapping his arms around him and burying his face in the backside of Billy's knee.

“What, you shy now all of a sudden?”

That has Sam turn his face up and smile angelically at Billy, who can't help but grin in return. He takes his son's hand, and together they start walking through the mall. Billy's steering the stroller one-handed while he tries to keep up with Sam – who can be really fast when he wants to be. And now he wants to be. Because he knows they're going to visit Steve at work.

And he also knows that there's *ice-cream* where Steve works. And that Steve's co-worker Robin always sneaks him a scoop in a paper cup when he shows up. Especially if Steve has the late shift and has to do clean-up.

"Hey, Hargrove!"

Looking up, Billy sees Jenny – co-owner and diligent worker of the mall's only café – wave him over from behind the counter. He changes direction in order to go and say hi, Sam trotting along without complaint, and stops in front of her. There's no queue, not at this time, and only a couple of patrons. "Hey, Jen."

"And who's this little fella, huh?" Jenny says, bending over the counter and completely ignoring Billy in favor of peering down at Sam. Sam smiles his *'I know I'm adorable'*-smile at her, making Billy snort. Not until then does Jenny turn her attention back on him. "Man, he's getting so big."

"He is," Billy agrees, not without pride in his voice.

Sam, not one to be left out of a conversation, says "Buh-ba-bek! Bubla le bek," with big eyes turned on Jenny, who laughs and melts right there in front of Billy's eyes.

"Oh my *god* aren't you *adorable*?" she asks and bends over the counter again so she can pretend to pinch his cheeks. Sam backs away out of reach – well-acquainted, by now, with people's desire to poke at his chubby cheeks – making both Billy and Jenny laugh.

"Everything good?" Billy asks when Jenny straightens up again, because he was here just this morning, delivering baked goods.

"Yeah," she says, "all good. Better than good, actually!" She indicates the lowest display shelf, which is empty. "That melon tart you did? Sold out immediately today. I think it's the heat. So I was thinking, maybe two of those instead of one, for tomorrow?"

Billy can't help but feel pleased at that. The melon tart is a creation of his own, after Frank was kind enough to let him experiment a bit. And apparently it's exactly what the people of Hawkins need, on hot

days like this one. “Sure thing, Jen!”

“Ble-blen!” Sam agrees, from where he’s leaning against the glass of the display shelves. He can only just barely reach up and peer inside the lowest one, and even though it’s empty he seems to find it immensely fascinating. He leaves smudged handprints on the clear surface, and Billy sighs. How did he get sticky already? He was clean when they exited the car!

When he has wiped off the glass with a couple of napkins – ignoring Jen’s insistence that she’ll take care of it – he grabs a hold of Sam’s hand again and tries to steer him out of the store. Sam, of course, complains about this because he may not be able to see that high but he *knows* they have cookies at the café and he likes cookies too.

(Never mind that his dad works at the bakery and could – theoretically – provide cookies at all times. Billy doesn’t, though. Because he’s trying to be a responsible parent. One cookie per week, on Saturdays, is the limit he has set.)

Sam doesn’t like cookies as much as he likes ice-cream, though. So to make him leave the café peacefully, Billy crouches down in front of him and says, eyebrows raised, “Don’t you wanna go visit Stevie at the ice-cream store?”

Predictably, it works. “Tee-vee!”

Billy nods. “Yeah, that’s right. Thought you would. Come on then.” He takes Sam by the hand again and leads him out of the café, nodding at Jenny over his shoulder and holding up two fingers to show that he hasn’t forgotten that she wants two tarts the next day.

Since he’s looking over his shoulder, he doesn’t see the people who are entering the café until it’s too late. Until he feels Sam tug on his hand, and looks down to see him point excitedly at ... Max.

Max, and Susan, and *Neil*.

(Family time in the mall. They never had that when Billy was around.)

Billy doesn’t have time to freeze, and barely has time to look at Neil –

their eyes meet for a fraction of a second, only – before Sam lets go of his hand to run over to his auntie Max, and stumbles over his own feet. He falls, and Billy's on his knees next to him in an instant, everything else forgotten.

“Hey Sammy,” he says and pulls his son up to inspect him. He's not hurt, but his eyes are big and there's a look on his face that could be a precursor to crying – if Billy doesn't distract him. So he boops him on the nose and grins. “Nah, look at you, you're okay!” Billy swings him around a bit, making him giggle, before putting him down on the floor and brushing off his clothes. “There we go. Now let's go see Steve.”

“Tee-vee!” Sam croons, the fall already forgotten at the prospect of ice-cream.

And it's not until Billy's almost out the door that he remembers. He stops for a moment and looks back at the three people standing there, who have moved past him and into the café while he was busy with Sam. Who are all looking at him.

Max smiles and waves, her eyes on Sam (they saw each other only two days ago, and she spent the entire time pushing Sam around the living room on her skateboard). Susan looks surprised to see them but there's a small smile on her face that almost looks nostalgic, even though her eyes keep darting to her husband. And Neil ...

There's a look of *something* on Neil's face, alright. Anger, resentment, disgust. Billy can't tell what it is, but he finds – for the first time in his life, and with a great deal of relief – that he just *doesn't care*.

He's not afraid. He's not sad. He's not yearning for his father's approval, or feeling crushed by the knowledge that he's never going to get it.

He looks at his father, and he feels ... nothing.

It's liberating. Like taking his first unhindered breath in forever. It tastes like freedom, and makes him smile.

He briefly sees confusion flash over the other man's face, before he

looks down at Sam – because there is no one in the world who deserves to be smiled at more than Sam – and says, “Come on. Let’s get ice-cream.” Sam chirps happily and pulls on his hand.

“Say bye-bye!” Billy chides gently, and watches as Sam throws up a hand and opens and closes his fist a couple of times in a toddler’s version of a wave, aimed at auntie Max.

“Buh-bye!”

And then Billy turns his back on Neil – putting him out of his thoughts entirely – to take the most important person in his life to get ice-cream, with the second most important person in his life.

His favorite boys.

Billy’s so lucky to have both of them in his life.

Notes for the Chapter:

Please don't be disappointed about the epilogue: I know Steve's in the TITLE of the chapter, but he's not actually in the chapter - the important thing, though, is that he's in Billy's LIFE. And Sam's. <3

A HUGE thank you to everyone who has read this, and commented. I treasure your comments so much, and am so grateful that you've liked this enough to keep reading. <3

Author's Note:

Read through a whopping ONE TIME (yes, I call it "editing" when I read through it once ...) so if you see any mistakes, let me know here or possibly on tumblr (ihni).

Note that Billy in this fic is having relations with a girl (kinda had to, to have a kid) in the beginning of this fic, but don't worry - none of them liked it. Billy is also performing ... let's call it "sexual transactions" for money in this fic, with OCs. Not to worry though,

he doesn't feel any particular way about it. The prostitution angst is at a minimum.

ALSO, please note: I don't know a lot about babies. I don't know a lot about sex work. I don't know a lot about America. I just, had a dream one night and wrote a tumblr post about it, and then I wanted to read a fic about it and since no one else would write it, I had to do it. It started off as a kid fic and turned into different chapters loosely focusing on Billy's relationships with different people.

It wasn't meant to be the longest thing I've ever written. Believe it or not, I was aiming for like 6K ...
Oops.

(Also, huge thanks to [withoneheadlight](#) on tumblr, who was kind enough to tell me about how babies work!)